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# Nice Guys Don't Work In Hollywood

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The Adventures of an Aesthete in the Movie Business

**Curtis Harrington**

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Drag City Incorporated | *Chicago*

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First Edition

From childhood's hour I have not been  
As others were; I have not seen  
As others saw; I could not bring  
My passions from a common spring.  
From the same source I have not taken  
My sorrow; I could not awaken  
My heart to joy at the same time;  
And all I loved, I loved alone. . . .

Edgar Allan Poe  
"Alone"

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# Introduction

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Curtis Harrington was an astonishingly sweet man. This may sound like a strange way to describe the director of such macabre treasures as *Night Tide*, *Games*, *What's The Matter With Helen?*, and *The Killing Kind*, but it's true. There was a wonderful elegance and generosity of spirit about him, and also a wicked sense of humor and a flair for the absurd. Although Curtis had no children of his own, his extended "family" included dozens of filmmakers, authors, movie buffs, dancers, actors, and other bohemian spirits who converged on his house at irregular intervals for one of his famous salon-like parties. It's a crime that Curtis's home in the Hollywood Hills couldn't have been preserved as a museum of his remarkable personality. The house was fascinating and mysterious, with more than a whiff of *beaux arts* decadence: you'd find a phrenologist's head in one corner near framed lithographs of vampire bats. In the dusty hall was a gallery of photos of actresses Curtis had directed — Julie Harris, Debbie Reynolds, Simone Signoret, Gloria Swanson, Shelley Winters — in sight of a particularly sinister ibex skull glaring down from the wall. Just the titles of books in his library would elicit a little shiver: *Poltergeists ... The History of Spiritualism ... The Autobiography of a Medium... The Table Rappers ...* I guess like Forrest Ackerman's Ackermansion, you had to be there — and now that Curtis is gone, his lovely, decaying home and its magical owner exist only as a memory.

Curtis's films, too, were filled with odd bric-a-brac — the severed hand in a jar in *Night Tide*, the sinister amusement machines in *Games* — and equally eccentric characters. Who can forget the surreal sight of dozens of little moppets furiously training to be the next Shirley Temple in *What's The Matter With Helen?*, or the great Agnes Moorehead as an evangelist in the same film. Curtis's parents had gone to the see the real Sister Aimee back in Los Angeles in the 1930s, and he loved



repeating, with a gleeful cackle, her admonition to the faithful: “I don’t want to hear the clink of coins — *I only want to hear the rustle of DOLLAR BILLS!*”

There are a number of reasons why Curtis is very important and very unique as a director. He was one of the first and only avant-garde filmmakers to make a successful transition into mainstream Hollywood and yet still retain the spontaneous, imaginative qualities of his experimental work. His first feature *Night Tide*, starring Dennis Hopper, is one of the great debuts by a young filmmaker, an almost perfectly pure movie in many ways. The only first film I can compare it to is Nicholas Ray’s *They Live By Night*, which also deals with star-crossed young lovers. *Night Tide* has an incredibly tender, yearning, poetic quality, which you can also clearly see in his early experimental films like *Fragment of Seeking*. I think possibly David Lynch is the only other director who made the transition from avant-garde cinema to the mainstream as successfully as Curtis — and of course, Lynch came several decades later.

Curtis was also one of the first American directors to start as a film critic and scholar and later become a director himself, years before Godard and Truffaut and the *Cahiers du Cinema* gang in France. Curtis wrote possibly the first serious articles on James Whale, director of *Frankenstein*, at a time when Whale was almost completely forgotten. Years later, as he recounts here, Curtis was instrumental in saving one of Whale’s masterpieces, *The Old Dark House*, from being lost forever. Curtis was extremely proud of writing the first monograph on the films of director Josef von Sternberg in the 1950s. If you look at Curtis’s films, you can see qualities of the great classic films that he admired and absorbed, and I think Whale and von Sternberg would both be proud that the young film critic who championed them would go on to make a film as brilliant as *Night Tide*.

Finally, Curtis was a great Los Angeles filmmaker. His movies are filled with an incredible love for this city, its people, and its history. There are many great poison-pen letters to L.A. in the movies—from *In a Lonely Place* to *Chinatown*—but maybe none so dark and disturbing as Curtis’s own *What’s The Matter With Helen?* It seems to sum up, in all its barely suppressed hysteria and faded hopes of stardom, his ever-conflicted feelings about

the movie industry, which he details with exquisite savagery in this book. Even his earliest memories revolved around the movies. Curtis once told me that he thought modern movie theaters should have Crying Rooms — those ingenious and slightly alarming soundproof booths where mothers could take their upset babies and watch the movies — because he remembered being in the Crying Room at the Los Angeles Theater downtown as a child: “My parents would drop me off there when they went to the movies . . . I must have been three or four, and it was just wonderful. They had a sandbox inside the downstairs playroom and a slide for the children.” If you’re lucky enough to go inside the Los Angeles Theater sometime when it’s open, venture downstairs: you’ll see the playroom is still there, with its cracked plaster and peeling murals, where Curtis played as a toddler.

Even Curtis’s final film as a director, *Usher*, with its unforgettable images of Curtis in drag as Madeline Usher(!), is a twisted love letter of sorts to L.A. It was filmed at Curtis’s house and evokes a kind of “hidden strangeness” that is constantly lurking behind the facades of all those vine-covered Hollywood mansions. Curtis was a sweet man, but he was also unflinchingly honest — in person and on film. He may have sympathy for Ann Sothorn’s tyrannical mom in *The Killing Kind* or for Shelley Winters’s hopeless, pathetic Helen Hill in *What’s The Matter With Helen?*, but he understands that they’re monsters, true monsters of a very human kind, and that’s what makes them so haunting.

I became friends with Curtis through the American Cinematheque in Hollywood, where he had a retrospective of his films in 1997 and where he was a frequent guest and audience member. One of the great things about Curtis as a person and a filmmaker was how *curious* he was about seeing other directors’ movies — movies from all over the world. I often ran into Curtis at movie theaters: Sid Grauman’s Egyptian Theatre, UCLA Film and TV Archive, the NuArt, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. It seems he was always going to the movies. It’s only fitting that the Academy should have a hand in the publication of this memoir, since Curtis entrusted one of his most precious legacies — his early experimental films including *Fragment of Seeking*, *The*

*Wormwood Star*, and others — to them for preservation and restoration.

A few months before he passed away, Curtis and I had lunch together at an Italian restaurant on the Sunset Strip. We sat there, surrounded by beautiful young things in insect shades and artfully ripped jeans — today's equivalent of the Shirley Temple wannabes in *What's The Matter With Helen?*, I guess. Curtis was something of a glorious ruin by that point, his wrinkled skin mottled and discolored by age spots. He sat there, casting a wry eye at the beautiful young things, and shared stories of old Hollywood: of his friend Jean Howard, ex-wife of Charlie Feldman and thrower of fabulous parties in the 1940s and '50s; of visiting his idol Marlene Dietrich in Las Vegas during one of her cabaret performances (he'd desperately wanted Dietrich for the lead in *Games*, but the head of Universal dismissed her: "Dietrich? Nobody wants her!"). The conversation detoured to Simone Signoret who Curtis wound up casting in *Games* instead. After shooting one night, Curtis had set up a screening for her of the notorious midget western *The Terror of Tiny Town* which he thought was a hoot. Halfway through, Signoret bolted up in Communist outrage at the exploitation of the midgets and stormed out, much to the amusement of Curtis and his friends. That's how it was with Curtis — so many stories, so many hidden doorways with wonderful, eccentric people behind them.

Dennis Bartok,  
Producer & Writer;  
Former Head of Programming,  
American Cinematheque

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# Prologue

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Jennifer Jones was giving a party for Truman Capote. Truman was in the midst of writing *In Cold Blood* and had decided to visit California accompanied by Alvin Dewey, the small-town sheriff he had become friendly with in Kansas. Jennifer gave the party in the big house at 1400 Tower Grove Road in Beverly Hills, which she shared with her husband David O. Selznick.

My friend Bernardine Fritz had asked me to escort her to the party. Bernardine was a woman *d'un certain âge* who had befriended me and often invited me to the lively tea parties she held in her small house in Coldwater Canyon. She called herself “an old China hand,” since she had resided in Shanghai for a time in the 1930s. She had also lived in France in the 1920s where she had been friends with the likes of Isadora Duncan and Aleister Crowley. Bernardine wore a great deal of heavy Chinese jewelry, and the lobes of her ears were excessively long due to the weight of pendant earrings of jade and precious stones. She had many artistic and expatriate friends who gathered at her salons, and like most intellectual Americans who have lived abroad for great lengths of time, she had fascinating stories to tell. I felt privileged to be her friend.

Immediately after our arrival, as Bernardine was introducing me to Jennifer, I heard a high-pitched voice with a Southern accent: “Harrington, Harrington! It must be Curtis Harrington!” Truman Capote was rushing toward me from across the room with his hand outstretched. “I just love your film,” he gushed. Since at that point I had only made one feature film, *Night Tide*, and a few short avant-garde films, his enthusiasm was much appreciated. Later in the evening, he explained to me that he and the film critic Dwight Macdonald had read a laudatory review of *Night Tide* in *Time* magazine and sought out the film when it was playing in a 42nd Street grind house. They both loved it.

Dinner was to be served in the long galleria off the living room at a series of round tables, each seating ten. The party was an A-list Hollywood event, and I was dazzled to find myself in the company of Rosalind Russell, Natalie Wood, and Nick Dunne, among others. When I found my place card, I discovered that I was seated next to Loretta Young. I remembered that she had given a lecture when I was student at the USC film school, and I had been put off by her bright and cheerful glibness, which struck me as phony and insincere.

I was at a loss to think of something to say to her. Then I recalled that she was a Roman Catholic, so I mentioned, as a conversational gambit, something about the Legion of Decency — the organization devoted to condemning films deemed unsuitable for a Catholic audience. Miss Young rose to the bait. “Oh, yes,” she said. “But I do think they should not only condemn films that are unsuitable but should praise films that are acceptable.”

“Yes,” I murmured, “that would be admirable.”

Suddenly her face hardened. “Because I really think films have become absolutely filthy!”

I couldn’t imagine what she was talking about. The Shur-lock Office was still bird-dogging films to guarantee their clean content, and the big porn breakthrough had yet to happen. With genuine curiosity, I asked, “Just what films are you referring to, Miss Young?”

She thought for a moment. “The films of Sam Spiegel, for example,” she offered triumphantly.

Again, I couldn’t imagine what she was talking about. I thought of such distinguished productions as *On the Waterfront*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, and *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Finally she said, “*Lawrence of Arabia*! It was an entire film about a . . .” She spat out the word contemptuously, “a *homosexual*!”

# Before I Knew What a Movie Was

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I was trying to figure out how they managed to hide the shadowy human figures behind the curtain. They had no color. They were black and white and gray, and they kept changing size all the time. What puzzled me was how it all worked. This is my first movie memory, before I knew what a movie was.

\* \* \*

I lived with my parents on a street in West Los Angeles called Ensley Avenue. The house was a California Spanish-style white stucco with a tiled roof and tiles on the floor in the entrance hall. It had been built by one of my uncles who was a contractor. The house is still there, but I have not been inside it since I was a child. Like so many people during the Great Depression, my parents lost ownership of it and we moved to an upper duplex on Kinnard Avenue in the same vicinity.

At the time, my father was a young attorney just getting started in his own law office in Sawtelle. He had been born and raised on a farm in Kansas, on land homesteaded by my grandmother's family. My mother was born in Sioux City, Iowa, of Norwegian immigrants. They had met in Montana where my mother was working as a legal secretary. How they happened to be together in Montana at the same time, I have never known, but after getting married, they moved to the promised land of California, where I was born on September 17, 1926.

My memories become much more vivid regarding the time we lived on Kinnard. I experienced my first earthquake there, the great temblor of 1933. My mother was feeding me supper in the kitchen when the house began to shake. She grabbed me,

lifted me into her arms, and ran toward the back door, then changed her mind and turned around and ran for the front door. As I watched the large table in the dining room gliding across the floor, she ran down the stairs and onto the lawn in front of the house. Neighbors were gathering in front of the adjoining houses and stood in little clumps, watching and wondering what might happen next. But none of the buildings crumpled to the ground, and soon the trembling stopped. Later I learned that at the very moment of the quake, my father was just about to step up on the porch of a house to talk with the occupant about a legal matter. The woman inside had noticed the strange man approaching and became terrified. She thought he was pounding on the door, trying to get in by force.

In this much more innocent time, despite the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby, my parents were in the habit of dropping me off at a matinee and picking me up after the movie was over. I saw my first movies at the Fox Westwood and sometimes at the Nuart Theatre in Sawtelle where I most fondly recall seeing *Death Takes a Holiday* with Fredric March as Prince Sirki. I adored the scene where he demonstrates his powers by blowing on a bouquet of roses that instantly wilts under his breath. And in *Chandu the Magician*, the scene in which the beautiful Princess Nadji and the evil followers of the Ubasti Temple, with its huge statue of the Cat Goddess, try to bring back to life the long-dead Egyptian princess, stirred something in me. I loved the mystery, the excitement, the suspense of it.

Another time my parents dropped me off on a Sunday afternoon at the Orpheum Theatre downtown. When I approached the box office with my carefully clutched money, the girl at the window told me that children could not be admitted unless accompanied by an adult. As I recall, this information did not unduly alarm me, even though my parents had already sped away in the family car. I went and stood by the entrance and asked each person entering if I could go with them into the theater. Very shortly a gentlemen said, "Sure, kid," and gave me his hand.

Once inside, I was able to figure out why children weren't readily admitted. This was the era when theaters featured "six acts of vaudeville" in addition to a movie double bill. That day



the headliner of the vaudeville part of the show was an act called “Rosita Royce and Her Dove Dance.” Apparently at the time, Rosita Royce was Sally Rand’s nearest competitor. With Sally it was fans, with Rosita it was doves. Rosita appeared in a deep blue light, her body a pearl-like white. She held her arms in such a way that two doves strategically covered her breasts, and one dove, held low, covered the most secret and private place in her anatomy. It was lyrical and wondrous to see. The doves were marvelously trained and did exactly what Rosita required of them. Of course, the audience hoped that they would get out of control and fly away. I did not bother to tell my parents about the difficulty I had had getting in, and said nothing about Rosita and her dove dance. I was learning that there are some things you just don’t tell your parents. It makes life easier.

Living in Westwood, within easy walking distance of the red streetcars, my mother did all of her important shopping downtown. There she would treat me to a lunch at Clifton’s Cafeteria, an enchanted kingdom for a child. The fountains spouted limeade instead of drinking water, and there was a “sherbet mine” where you opened tiny, jeweled doors to discover a bowl of orange sherbet sent up from the bowels of the earth. There was also a booth where you could immerse yourself in religious contemplation by watching images of Christ and listening to inspirational music. And then, in parts of the restaurant with a clock-like regularity, there would be tropical rainfall — real water falling from pipes in the ceiling.

Meanwhile, beyond my awareness as a child, the economic depression which had already cost us our house grew deeper. My father began to spend time away from us. One day he announced that we would be moving to another town some distance away. Our move to Beaumont, California, solved the mystery of my father’s frequent disappearances. He had been spending time there to establish a new situation for his career. I was nine years old when my mother and I finally left Los Angeles to live in this small town on the road to Palm Springs. My father had shown great pluck and determination in doing this during the very depths of the depression. He decided that he would have a better chance as a big fish in a small pond than to be the unknown trying to establish himself in the big

city. In this he was very right, because in short order he was chosen to be the city attorney, and we became official members of the town's elite citizens.

It might just as well have been Winesburg, Ohio, or Kings Row. Though it was California, it had a pronounced Midwestern flavor populated with clapboard houses built around 1910, a few small churches of the respectable kind, and a Holy Roller gathering place where shouts and speaking in tongues could be heard. In the hills next to Beaumont, there were orchards of cherry and peach trees and each year the town had a Cherry Festival, featuring a Ferris wheel and a roundabout of swings along with displays of home canning and crates of cherries. This brought in a number of tourists to the ordinarily somnolent town, as well as an occasional movie star of B pictures.

Sprinkled among the more conventional citizens were two very visible anomalies: a lesbian and a madwoman. The madwoman, whom hardly anyone ever spoke to, dressed in a beige linen suit with a skirt that went to the ground, her face rice-powdered a pasty white. This extraordinary creature was in the habit of giving my father a gift of home-baked pies from time to time. He brought the pies home and was inclined to eat them, but my mother promptly threw them in the garbage can, convinced they were poisoned. The lesbian had short hair and advertised her masculinity by wearing tweed suits with neckties. Miss Bethune Shipp was her name. The children in school explained Miss Shipp's eccentric appearance by saying she had wanted to be a boy when she was little.

Another benighted citizen of the town was the jeweler. He was a client of my father's and had a son about my age. He wasn't doing well financially and offered to give me magic lessons to help pay for my father's services. Mr. Berman was an amateur magician who didn't like the mechanical tricks. He believed in the mastery of coin and card manipulation, and this is what he tried to teach me. Unfortunately, my hands were too small to be very good at palming coins and cards, but I tried very hard. Mr. Berman found his own son awkward and slow and often berated him by holding me up as a sterling example of what he was not. The boy's mother had a mournful, downtrodden look as if she, too, were berated by her husband

when I was not around.

Occasionally, Mr. Berman performed at church socials, and I worked as his assistant. He not only did coin and card tricks but was also an escape artist in the tradition of Houdini. He escaped from a big black bag that had been sewn up by members of the audience. Even I was not privy to how this was done. Then one day the Bermans, without any announcement, left town. A few months later, we read in the papers that Mr. Berman had been shot to death by his son for beating his mother.

Until our arrival in Beaumont, my mother had lived quietly as a housewife. Now suddenly she became active in the social life of the town. She joined the Women's Club and the Bridge Club and gave luncheons and dinners for the local swells who were my father's friends. The mayor, the police chief, and the superintendent of schools were frequent visitors. She helped out with potluck dinners at the community church — a non-denominational church that seemed to be primarily Presbyterian in nature — and was eventually elected president of the Women's Club, which raised her civic profile even further. With my father away at his office during the day, and my mother frequently out at social functions in the afternoon, I would often come home from school to an empty house. As an avid reader, if I did not choose to read at home in the afternoon, I would very likely visit the local library.

The library was a small, handsome neoclassical building on a side street within easy walking distance of where we lived. It was one of the many libraries that the great American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie had given to his country. Upon my first visits, I was told I was too young to be allowed in the main library and so was relegated to the children's section which was in the basement. It was there that I first discovered the magic of L. Frank Baum and his successor, Ruth Plumly Thompson, who wrote the *Oz* books. I identified absolutely with Dorothy's adventures in the amazing never-never land of *Oz* and ravenously devoured them all.

But soon the books in the children's section began to seem very limited. My nascent intellectual curiosity was stirred, and I wanted to explore the forbidden territory of the books that were kept upstairs. I don't recall exactly how I managed the

transition, through probably by asking to see the work of a writer I had read about in school whose books were not considered in the pantheon of children's literature. In any event, I managed to charm the librarian, Miss Clapp, a middle-aged lady who had fuzzy red hair and wore glasses. I must have impressed her with my eagerness and brightness, because overnight, I was no longer consigned to the children's section.

It was at this moment that my intellectual growth began. Among the treasures of the upstairs, one of the first books to catch my eye was *Intellectual America* by Oscar Cargill, a professor of literature at New York University. I had already been feeling that I needed to know what had recently preceded me in the creative and intellectual life of my country. Even at that age, I felt I was standing, because of my ignorance, on the edge of a great black pit of emptiness. I needed to fill it in, and Cargill's book did this for me. Neither then nor, as it turned out, in the future did I become especially interested in ancient history or the literary works of the eighteenth century. All this seemed very irrelevant to my life. But knowledge of the more recent cultural past seemed to me to be essential. My interest in art and literature, starting with the late nineteenth century, remained a primary focus throughout my life.

Through Cargill's meticulous critical history of modern American literature, I discovered the poets E. E. Cummings, Marianne Moore, and Conrad Aiken, as well as the work of Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, Elinor Wylie, and Frederic Prokosch. If the books by these authors had been the most influential in the world of literature, there were still others that gave me tantalizing glimpses into the worlds beyond Beaumont. One was René Fülöp-Miller's biography, *Rasputin, the Holy Devil*. Rasputin's reputation reeked of wild sex and sinister occultism. (Little did I know that one day I would entertain in my own home the legendary Russian's daughter, Maria.) And then one day, I discovered on the shelves a literary landmark of the twentieth century. I had no idea that it had a history of being censored and forbidden by the authorities. It was James Joyce's *Ulysses*. I checked it out and took it home.

I tried to read it but found it too difficult, its prose too dense and convoluted in a way that impeded my comprehension. And what indeed, at the age of thirteen living in a small American

town, did I know of Ireland? I put the book aside, intending to return it shortly to the library. Then one evening, my parents entertained Mr. Cartwright, the local superintendent of schools, and his wife. Mr. Cartwright noticed the book lying on a table and looked at it in surprise. "What is this doing here?" he asked. My father and mother, who paid very little attention to anything I brought home from the library, said casually, "Oh, that's one of Curtis's books." Mr. Cartwright asked me to leave the room. He needed to discuss something privately with my parents. I can only imagine what he may have said to them. Perhaps he turned to Molly Bloom's soliloquy at the end of the book and read it to them. It is more likely that he simply explained that the book was unsuited for children, leaving the precise reason for this to the imagination of my parents.

I was not privy to this scene, nor was I present at the inevitable showdown with Miss Clapp, the librarian, over her shocking carelessness in letting me take out the offensive book. Apparently, this time the offending passages *were* read aloud. I know this because my mother later said to me that Miss Clapp had "blushed to the roots of her hair." What a terrible *auto-da-fé* this must have been for poor, kindly Miss Clapp. I was so grateful to her for allowing me "upstairs" at the library, and to think that this kindness had been ultimately rewarded with such calumny and shame! The tempest passed, and Miss Clapp was retained. I have often thought that this must have been due to the support she received from the library board, of which Miss Bethune Shipp was a member.

And thus I was able to continue to roam the stacks of books upstairs, always with breathless anticipation. Behind each spine, behind each cover, I might discover the secrets of the world. Then one day I took from the shelves a book called *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* by Edgar Allan Poe. It was a beautiful edition of his stories and, in time I discovered, a very famous and sought-after edition, illustrated hauntingly by Harry Clarke. "The Fall of the House of Usher" was the story that gripped me, held me in thrall as no other story ever had. By the end of it, I was almost gasping for breath and leapt from my chair in an attempt to relieve the pressure on my brain. The horror of the story's final revelation of the returned corpse totally engulfed my mind and senses. My memory was seared

with it, leaving a scar that I would never lose. It was as if I had discovered my soul mate in the world of literature.

The next revelation that the library held for me was a book about film. Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now: A Survey of World Cinema* introduced me to the great films of the silent era. The book was beautifully illustrated with stills from the films it analyzed, and it offered me vivid glimpses of films from all over the world that at the time I had very little chance of seeing in Beaumont.

The Hollywood films that I had seen up to that point had not inspired me. They were entertaining but slight and forgettable. Now I realized that the moving celluloid image could be used like literature and poetry and painting, as a creative medium in which man's highest and most personal inspirations could be powerfully interpreted. My imagination was more than piqued — it was enflamed.

I knew then what I wanted to do. I would become a film director. This realization was to become my strength . . . and my curse.

\* \* \*

My growing awareness of the cinema as a creative medium led me to look at the Hollywood films I was seeing with a new and more critical perception. I began to keep a film diary in which I listed the credits of the films I saw and created my own ratings system. At this time, there was no theater in Beaumont, so I was dependent on my parents or the parents of some of my school friends to take me to films six miles away in Banning. On special occasions, my parents would take me to Riverside where there were two theaters, the Fox and the De Anza. It was at the Fox Riverside that I saw *The Wizard of Oz* during its first release. Naturally, this was a much anticipated and very exciting moment as I had been so passionate about the books. The film was every bit as enchanting.

Eventually, a young man came to town and decided to build a movie theater in Beaumont. His name was Jimmie James, and he and his wife became good friends with my parents. The theater was a minimalist structure with a screen, seats, and projection booth that was manned by Jimmie himself. Once it

began operation, I managed to get a job there as an usher. This gave me an opportunity to see films over and over again until I practically knew them by heart. I was fascinated by Ben Hecht's *Angels Over Broadway* with its florid and overwritten dialogue, notably different from the dialogue one heard in most films of the time. Except for the films of Val Lewton, the 1940s was not a good period for my special love: horror movies. Lewton's films more than made up for the lack — *Cat People*, *I Walked With a Zombie*, *The Leopard Man*, and *Isle of the Dead*. I also enjoyed the Columbia B movies with the likes of Boris Karloff as a scientist seeking to communicate with his dead wife in *The Devil Commands*, and Peter Lorre as *The Face Behind the Mask*. Of course, my situation as usher forced me to see any number of films I might have not otherwise wished to see, such as Gene Autry and William Boyd westerns, a staple of small-town movie fare. But I did naively love the "Mexican Spitfire" series, starring Lupe Vélez, because they featured a wonderful old-time comedian named Leon Errol whom I found endlessly funny.

It was not long before I saw a movie whose star was to profoundly affect my life: *Seven Sinners* with Marlene Dietrich. I came home from it in a daze. I had never seen any movie star who was more enchanting. She was quite unlike any other screen personality I had ever seen; in fact, she absolutely dazzled me, and for days afterward, I could hardly think of anything else. Again, as with so many things that deeply affected me at this age, it was a quality that spoke to me in a way I did not yet understand. My reaction was intuitive. It was only later that I realized that Tay Garnett, the director, had in Dietrich's post-Sternberg films, presented her in a quasi-Sternbergian manner. So even before I'd ever seen a Sternberg film, I was allowed to perceive the "Dietrich mystique" in a way that her other films at the time, like *The Spoilers* or *Pittsburgh*, did not convey.

Other than the movies, life in this small town was quiet and uneventful. My personal life was mostly lived in the stimulations of my imagination, my discoveries in books, and my daydreams of what I might do with my life. Then a new family arrived in town, and reality and my imagination suddenly came together. The Wagoners, Harry and Betty, and

their three children — Norman, Walter, and Roseanne — had moved into a house in Cherry Valley surrounded by acres of fruit trees. Harry B. Wagoner was an artist, *en plein air* painter of the western desert. He promptly built a studio for his work, as well as the first private swimming pool in town. For some reason, of all the people in Beaumont, the Wagoners had chosen my parents to become their new best friends.

Harry was tall and good-looking with graying hair and a mustache. He affected well-tailored cowboy clothes and liked his vodka. His wife, Betty, was short and blond and an absolute dynamo of energy. She had trunkfuls of expensive furs, clothes, and jewels. The furs she wore always smelled of mothballs, an odor to which I still have a Proustian response: it makes me think of wealth. The two boys were handsome and in their late teens, but Roseanne, nicknamed “Bunny,” was my age and we promptly became chums. From then on, our lives were intertwined. All my holidays were spent at lavish parties given by the Wagoners, and Christmastime was especially celebratory. Every year they had a huge decorated tree with piles and piles of exquisitely wrapped presents underneath, and Santa Claus, in the person of Harry Wagoner, appeared and distributed presents to everybody. Once even I, suitably padded and disguised, did my Santa Claus impersonation using my idea of an aged voice accompanied with a great many “ho-ho-hos.”

These were indeed joyous times. Being a part of the Wagoners’ glamorous lifestyle plunged me into a milieu of wealth and privilege that went way beyond my ordinary middle-class existence. Mrs. Wagoner must have sensed something different in me, because one day she arrived at our house with a special gift. It was something she thought that I might enjoy. It turned out to be another crucial piece in my understanding of the world outside Beaumont, a rich extension of my library experience. It was a pile of old *Esquire* magazines.

If Oscar Cargill’s book had introduced me to the literary life of America, *Esquire* introduced me to its social and sexual life. These copies of *Esquire* were of a richness of content that bears no relationship with the *Esquire* of today. It was certainly the *ne plus ultra* of 1930s sophistication, easily a match for *Vanity Fair*, but always with a decidedly masculine slant. All this is quite forgotten by now, but back then the magazine boasted a



brilliant editor, well-known in his time, named Arnold Gingrich. He seemed to have his finger on the pulse of everything that was modern and significant in the life of the day. He published articles and stories by Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, John Steinbeck, and William Saroyan. There was art by George Grosz, Grant Wood, Reginald Marsh, and David Levine and racy cartoons by Alberto Vargas and George Petty, like the foldouts of the Petty girl, bursting with “pulchritude” in a skimpy bathing suit. Two cartoons stand out vividly in my memory: one of a woman sitting up in bed and looking in horror at something beyond our view, with the caption, “Clothes certainly *do* make the man!” The other a picture of a girl’s derriere and legs in the air as she hits the water in a dive, with the caption, “I still say it’s her better half.”

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If I do not describe my interactions with my mother and father at any length it is because I was blessed to have kindly, supportive parents who did not impose on me strictures or rules. I suppose they felt that as long as I didn’t get into trouble, I should be allowed to follow my interests as I wished. My passion for the cinema continued to develop rapidly after reading Paul Rotha’s book, and I begged them to buy me an 8mm camera. They most generously obliged when I was around the age of twelve and gave me a little Keystone home movie camera. At first, I used it as most people do—to record family events and the cavorting of my dog Ponto. Somewhere around the age of fourteen, I decided to try to make my own little film.

I chose the macabre story that had haunted me so: Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.” I coaxed a high school friend into playing the part of the Visitor and decided that only I could play Roderick Usher. I would play his sister Madeline as well, since she was his twin. I ordered a makeup kit and black female wig from the ubiquitous Johnson Smith Company. The Johnson Smith catalog was 596 pages of magic tricks, practical jokes, puzzles, reptiles (you could order a living sixty-inch alligator for \$25), birds, Lulu masks, model

rocket ships, fingerprint outfits, archery sets, punching bags, crystal radios, “how-to” books of every description, toys, and an elaborate stereopticon called a Vista Chromoscope that offered views of the battlefields of Europe and the Wisconsin Dells. An item that I fortunately never bought was called a “Radium Spinthariscopes,” a device in which you could watch the disintegration of an atom. For only one dollar it was “guaranteed to contain a minute quantity of radium.”

Having acquired the appropriate costumes and cast, I mounted my camera on a tripod and got my mother to press the button. For Madeline’s tomb, I built canvas flats and painted them as if they were walls of stone. I built a cardboard miniature for the exterior of the Usher residence, and at the end of the film, burnt it down instead of trying the difficult effect of letting it sink into the tarn. For the climatic sequence in which the dead Madeline returns from the tomb to claim her brother, I found wonderfully appropriate music in Charles Griffes’s (a great and unfairly neglected American composer) *The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan*, which I played on a gramophone. I typed the subtitles on my father’s typewriter and had them printed in reverse so that they would offer the traditional white lettering on black. I painted the main title by hand, which was preceded by a logo that announced “A Neptune Production.” And to think I knew absolutely nothing about astrology at the time! (Neptune, for readers who might be unacquainted with the language of astrology, is the planet that rules motion pictures). And so, at age fourteen, I completed my first film. Crude as it was, it more than suggested my sense of cinema and the direction of my future work.

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Meanwhile, I also indulged my interest in things theatrical in other ways. I built marionettes and entertained with them at church socials and my mother’s club events. Due to the huge popularity of Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy at the time, I tried my hand at ventriloquism and my parents accordingly bought me a dummy with which I could display my talent. At one point, my parents took me to meet the great magic

manufacturer Floyd Thayer at his residence, which had its own little theater and was filled with the paraphernalia of magical illusions. Fortunately, he did not think my “talent” as a child ventriloquist merited pursuing further, and I soon abandoned all interest in the subject.

Besides working nights at the theater, in the summers I worked in the outlying orchards, picking fruit. This brought me into contact with so-called “Okies,” the weather-beaten migratory workers celebrated in John Steinbeck’s famous novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, which had been so brilliantly brought to the screen by John Ford. As a kid in their midst, I was able to experience firsthand the ladies with their quaint sunbonnets and men in ragged overalls and work boots. It was obvious to me that they were hard-working and honest people still struggling with the Great Depression, which my parents had so skillfully protected me from.

This led to my first political awakening. Among my parents’ friends were Roy and Ann Lay who lived in the neighboring town of Riverside. Ann Lay was slender, attractive, and always well-dressed. Roy was a bear of a man, easygoing with a red nose that reminded me of W. C. Fields’s infamous proboscis and that, no doubt, owed its condition to a similar overindulgence in drink. They had clearly encountered their own problems in the depression, since Roy made his living at the time running a hamburger café. But Ann Lay didn’t let this affect her airs and graces, or her politics, in any way. She was always prattling about the greatness of America and what it meant to be a “real” American. She hated President Roosevelt and tended to defend Herbert Hoover at the drop of a hat.

All this meant very little to me as a teenager until one day I heard her comment about the “Okies,” the very people whom I had been working among. I couldn’t understand how she could possibly know anything about them; nevertheless, there she was, saying that they were lazy and didn’t want to work, that all they really wanted was a government handout. This was my first conscious exposure to the right-wing mentality. From that moment and for the rest of my life, I have disliked it. I have had to fight against it in my life and in my work and witnessed its culmination in the nightmarish horrors of the Bush administration. No argument, no explanation, no behavior that

I have encountered has ever for one instant changed my opinion.

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A few years earlier, the school superintendent, Mr. Cartwright, had decided that I might as well skip eighth grade and go directly into high school. This acceleration of my schooling only brought me that much closer to my emergence into the larger world beyond Beaumont that I had been reading and dreaming about. I was also now reaching the age where the idea of sex began to go beyond the theoretical into the actual, and I must confess that I began to make a few explorations in this direction with some of my male school chums. Of course, I went to parties and school dances with girls, and was endlessly admonished by my mother that I should not form a liaison with either a Catholic or Jewish girl. But she need not have worried, because I was more interested in good-looking young men of my age. This seemed perfectly natural to me, since I followed my feelings and impulses, and it did not occur to me to attach any sense of guilt or shame to my activities. I developed a particular attachment to the youngest son of my piano teacher, and he returned my interest in kind. Naturally, our assignations could not take place in our homes under the surveillance of our parents, so we met mostly at night in the local funeral parlor where he earned extra money as a part-time night watchman. Love and death. There they were, already in close juxtaposition even before I knew of their frequent pairing in the work of the great poets.

As my schooling grew to a close, I continued to long for the day I would break away from small-town existence. The wider world made itself known in Beaumont from time to time, and it only made my determination grow. For instance, I was in the habit of having lunch at a local hamburger and malt café near the high school. One day, while I sat at the counter with some of my schoolmates, a woman accompanied by an older female companion came in and sat at one end of the counter. I recognized her instantly. It was Jean Arthur, driving back to Los Angeles after a visit to Palm Springs. There was much whispering and giggling among my friends, but no one dared

approach her. By the time she was ready to leave, I had decided that I would go up to her and ask for her autograph. I didn't collect autographs, but it was a reasonable avenue of approach to a movie star. I followed her out to her Packard convertible with the top down and reached her just as she was about to get in.

I thrust out a piece of paper and a pen: "Miss Arthur, may I have your autograph?" I heard later that she never gave autographs, but that day she did for me. She said, "This looks like a nice place to live." I was staring at a pile of hatboxes in the back seat with New York labels on them. She was indeed from the world "out there" that I so longed to enter. "Yes," I answered. And then my envy got the better of me. "Unfortunately," I added. It was a non sequitur, but how else could I express that I felt like a prisoner? I detected a slight frown and then she got into the car and was gone. My friends, who had been watching avidly from the malt shop, rushed out and surrounded me. I had dared and they were happy.

I continued to get good grades at school, and my parents began to explore the possibility of sending me to college. Since my own interests and ambitions seemed to have no practical side to them, my parents decided a good safe and remunerative profession for me would be to become a dentist. This meant that I would enroll in a premedical curriculum at Occidental College. Since I had no clear idea of how I might actively pursue a career as a movie-maker, I easily acquiesced to this. It would get me on my way at least, and out of Beaumont.

At my high school graduation ceremony, as a reward, I suppose, for my excellent academic record, I was given the American Legion medal for good citizenship. I received it with a full awareness of my hypocrisy. I was not Mr. Goody Two-shoes, and I knew that the award represented the kind of mindless conservative patriotism for which I had contempt. They were giving the award to a monster and didn't know it.

# Los Angeles: The Arrival

## Hollywood and the Avant-Garde

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Occidental College is a small liberal arts school nestled in the foothills of Eagle Rock. Back in the forties, it was not so much a community but a wide place in the road between Glendale and Pasadena. Its name comes from the fact that in the vicinity there is a large outcropping of rocks with a natural indentation that looks like a winged eagle. The college campus is handsomely laid out, with buildings in a neo-Grecian style, which helped me to imagine I was attending an Ivy League school. I had been to the campus once in my high school days to see a student production of *Kind Lady* with Charlotte Clary (as an acting coach) and George Nader, both of whom were destined to become prominent in the Hollywood movie community. Perhaps that occasion was when my parents first considered enrolling me at Occidental.

When I arrived in 1945, it was still a time of war, and the school had inaugurated an accelerated program that enabled me to arrive and start school immediately after my high school graduation. My parents drove me from Beaumont with my luggage directly to a fraternity house on campus where I was to be housed. I think I detected a few tears welling in my mother's eyes as she said goodbye to me. My father shook my hand and wished me luck. As I watched them drive away, my eyes were quite dry. I had been looking forward to this moment for a long time. I was free and now starting the Great Adventure in the world I had so far only read about.

It was not long before I had a shocking sexual encounter. The fraternity house was rather small, and a group of us new

students all lived in close proximity to each other, two or four to a room. I could not help but be aware of the handsomeness of one particular boy, probably a couple of years older than me. I did not dare show my interest in him and only glanced at him occasionally, and then only in little imperceptible gulps. Of course the whole subject of sexual attraction between boys was utterly taboo in such a macho atmosphere as a frat house. One night Jim (that was his name) had a towel around his waist and was on his way to the showers. I glanced at him. Just before I quickly shifted my gaze, he said, "Do you think I'm beautiful?"

"Why. . . ah . . . no," I stammered, trying to be cool and casual, while all the while my heart was beating in my throat.

"Well," he said slowly, "you must think I'm beautiful or you wouldn't want something." And then he was gone. For an ordinary jock, this seemed to me extraordinarily sophisticated. It had never happened before, nor has it ever happened since. Perhaps that is why I remember it so vividly.

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While at Occidental, I had a drama teacher, Eugenia Ong, who obsessively devoted her talents to lowering the voice pitch of her female pupils. Those with the usual high-pitched and misplaced voice of the American girl all began, with the help of Ms. Ong, to develop the most pleasing lower pitch. I remembered this later when I was asked to use a contract player at Universal with an unpleasant voice and got the studio to hire a voice coach for her who achieved an absolute transformation. I tried out for many of the school's theatrical productions and managed to snag the role of Leo in *The Little Foxes*.

I also took a course that tested my writing skills and was told by the professor that I had in my work the persuasive ability of an Upton Sinclair, an author whom I had not read then and have not read since. I joined a literary group on campus and was able to introduce the members to the work of Ray Bradbury, then quite unknown except to the readers of *Weird Tales*. The group was properly impressed and surprised that such a good writer would appear in "the pulps."

I recall nothing about my "premed" activities, other than the

unpleasant task of dissecting a formaldehyde-soaked frog, a task that introduced the word “cloacae” into my vocabulary. Since I could hardly arouse myself much concern in the dissecting of said frog, I began to look beyond the campus into other activities that did interest me. One day I came across an announcement of the formation of a film society in Hollywood. I knew what a film society was because I had read about the activities of the London Film Society in *The Film Till Now*, so I made further inquiries and soon was on a bus to Hollywood to join the newly formed group.

The society had been put together by an art gallery owner, Clara Grossman, as a weekly event at her American Contemporary Gallery on Hollywood Boulevard. She was a displaced New York Jewish intellectual who exhibited mainly the kind of social protest paintings from the years of the WPA — painters like Jack Levine and Ben Shahn. She catered to the Hollywood Communist crowd, and her film showings were mostly old documentaries and silent classics put out by the Museum of Modern Art Film Library under the stewardship of Iris Barry. The extraordinary thing about Clara Grossman’s enterprise was that since she was showing these programs for the first time in Hollywood, she was able to invite many of their stars and directors to attend the screenings. Because of this, I was able to see *Broken Blossoms* in the company of Mr. Griffith and Miss Gish, and *Les bas-fonds* in the company of Jean Renoir and the film’s art director, Eugene Lourie. Frequent attendees included Betsy Blair and Gene Kelly, and Olivia de Havilland and her husband Marcus Goodrich. The screenwriter of *Cat People*, DeWitt Bodeen, also came often, as did film critics and historians like Lewis Jacobs, Seymour Stern, and Herb Sterne.

At one particular program, I noticed a good-looking young man my own age in the audience. After the films, I decided to strike up a conversation. He told me his name was Kenneth Anger, and it turned out that he had the same filmmaking ambitions that I had. A few screenings later, we met Forrest Ackerman and his girlfriend Tigrina, who wore something very exotic that I had never seen before: emerald green nails. Forry, as he was affectionately known, invited Kenneth and me to visit his apartment, and we found his shelves filled with issues



of *Weird Tales*, as well as the glorious posters from *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. Although he was known in the world of fandom as Mr. Sci-Fi, Forry was just as much an aficionado of horror and fantasy.

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These first two years of college training were a hiatus of sorts, which led to my temporary entrance into the job market. I desperately wanted to get inside a movie studio, so I decided to try my luck at getting a job in one. In those days, the studios had an employment office for the minor functionaries, and I filled out an application at Paramount. It seemed to me that being a messenger boy was just about the most insignificant job one could have, so during my interview when I was offered a job as just that, I said I wanted something better.

The interviewer looked at me with astonishment. He had never before encountered such cheek and arrogance in a teenager with absolutely no experience of any kind to offer. But instead of steering me politely to the door, he gulped and said, "How would you like a job in the publicity department?" This sounded much better to me, and I said that would be fine. I was hired on the spot and told where to show up for work. It took me a while to realize that I was simply a messenger boy assigned to the publicity department, but by then I was *inside a studio*, and it didn't matter.

Besides delivering interoffice memos from the publicity department to the various producers' offices, I spent as much time as I could steal visiting movie sets. Alan Ladd was perhaps the biggest star on the lot, but there were plenty of others. Among those I saw working were Barbara Stanwyck, Veronica Lake, Ray Milland, Marlene Dietrich, Olivia de Havilland, Diana Lynn, and Betty Hutton. The actor who fascinated me the most was Alan Ladd, who I thought was very sexy. He was a muscular little man with languorous bedroom eyes. He and Veronica Lake were perfectly paired because they were both extraordinarily tiny. If Ladd appeared with a taller costar, his sets were covered with boxes and runways to make him seem taller than his leading lady. This was where I found out that illusions are the very substance of moviemaking.

The star directors were Cecil B. DeMille, John Farrow, and Mitchell Leisen. I often managed to have lunch in the commissary where I witnessed the colorful arrival of Mr. DeMille, in his riding boots and carrying his riding crop, as he was seated with a large entourage at the “DeMille table,” with a special pink-upholstered chair reserved for the Master. Later, when I got a better-paying job as a clerk in the story files, I had a desk that looked down on the street that led into the studio from the famous main gate where Gloria Swanson is seen arriving to visit DeMille in *Sunset Blvd.*

My job often took me to the mimeograph department where a whole group of messengers and other minor functionaries would gather. They were all young and given to gossip about the stars. The big question was always who was gay and who was not. The rumor mill worked overtime with the arrival of a new star from New York, Lizabeth Scott. She was a “protégée” of the producer Hal Wallis, but this didn’t prevent the speculation that she had been the protégée of someone quite different in New York, namely Tallulah Bankhead, which meant that she must be a lesbian. Directors on the lot did not escape this wellspring of gossip about their sex lives either. Mitchell Leisen made no particular secret of his sexual orientation, since he could so often be seen walking down the executive hallways with his boyfriend, dancer Billy Daniels.

Leisen was the one director who didn’t allow me on his sets. If he saw me peeking around the corner of a flat, he would immediately shout, “Get that kid off my set!” Embarrassed, I would beat a hasty retreat, only to have the same thing repeated the next time I tried sneaking into Leisen’s forbidden territory. This was especially difficult for me when Dietrich was working on *Golden Earrings*. As much as I wanted to watch her at work, most of my glimpses of her in her dark gypsy makeup were when she was having lunch in the commissary.

Being at Paramount gave me a chance to speak to two legendary figures of the silent screen whom I had read about in *The Film Till Now*. One day, while visiting the set of a Barbara Stanwyck movie, I introduced myself to ZaSu Pitts, who was playing the small part of Stanwyck’s maid. I asked her to tell me about working with Erich von Stroheim. “Well, what is it you want to know about the old coot?” she said. I told her that

Paul Rotha said she had given one of the greatest performances in the cinema in *Greed*. “Really?” she asked, as if not quite believing me. She went on to talk about the brothel scene in *The Wedding March*, how it shocked everybody with its presentation of an international whorehouse filled with girls of all nationalities and skin colors. During the filming of *Sunset Blvd.*, a set I never managed to visit, I saw von Stroheim walking toward me on the sidewalk outside of the studio, and I stopped him and asked him if the complete version of *Greed* still existed. He was very polite, very courteous. “No,” he said, not disguising the bitterness in his voice, “they burnt it for the silver they could get out of it.”

Besides visiting sets during my off time, I would sometimes go into the projection booths to watch the dailies on some currently shooting film. One day some executives were running Sternberg’s *The Scarlet Empress*. I walked in after the film had already started, so I didn’t instantly identify it, but the sheer magic of what I was seeing overwhelmed me. I came in on the scene in which Dietrich is being prepared for her wedding by the obviously gay hairdresser twirling his curling iron, and the queen is expressing her concern over the bride’s headdress. The wedding ceremony itself is in a Russian chapel lit with a thousand candles. Dietrich’s eyes are filled with tears, and her trembling breath causes the candle she is holding to flicker. This was how I discovered that behind the magic of Dietrich there was a Master Magician pulling the strings. Josef von Sternberg was to become my teacher, my mentor, my idol.

I wanted to find out everything about him. My job in the file department enabled me to dig out the screenplay of *The Scarlet Empress*. I discovered that in 1933, this extraordinarily lavish film only cost a little more than \$400,000. I also brought out some of Sternberg’s other scripts, and this led me to find Sergei Eisenstein’s treatment of *An American Tragedy*, which Sternberg eventually adapted and directed in 1931. It was only much later that I read the sad story of Eisenstein’s brief sojourn in Hollywood and his forced return to Russia due to anti-communist hysteria. His scenario was vivid, impressionistic, beautiful — in short, the work of an *artist*, a word that has always brought disdain and distrust into the minds of the Hollywood moguls.

I had been an avid reader of the British film magazine *Sight & Sound* and learned they were doing a series of supplements called "An Index to the Films of" that focused on the work of various directors, each in a single issue. I applied for the job of writing "An Index to the Films of Josef von Sternberg." The American editor of the series was Herman G. Weinberg, a film critic and historian who lived in New York. We corresponded for a while, and I somehow convinced him to let me do it. It was my first professional writing assignment.

I was determined to interview everyone I could find who had worked on von Sternberg's films. Joe himself was living in New Jersey at the time, and Miss Dietrich was not then in Hollywood, but there were plenty of others around and I sought them out. My most amusing interview was with Ona Munson, who had starred as Mother Gin Sling in *The Shanghai Gesture*. She absolutely hated Sternberg. She said her experience with him was the most horrendous of her career. She explained that at the time she had recently appeared as the Madame in *Gone With the Wind*. She was not sure she was right for the part of Mother Gin Sling, but Sternberg insisted that she was the actress he wanted. Although the role was of a Chinese woman, he felt he "had to see a blond underneath the black wig." He made some screen tests of Munson in which she had never looked more beautiful. She worked on a voice characterization that she felt suitable for the character and finally agreed to do the part.

When she arrived on the set the first day, Sternberg told her to forget about the tests they had made and her voice characterization. He insisted that she use her normal voice and said, "Do exactly what I tell you to do." She was shocked. She felt she had been completely misled into accepting the role. "From that day on," Ona Munson said, "I had to be carried out on a stretcher after each day's work."

I tried to arrange for screenings of the Sternberg films I hadn't seen and was able to view *The Case of Lena Smith*, his last silent film. I remember a visually stunning sequence in which human shadows played against billowing sheets hung out to dry in the wind. Other than the projectionist that day, I am probably the last person to have seen this film. Shortly afterward, this print was destroyed in a vault cleaning aimed at

getting rid of flammable nitrate prints. Technology had advanced, and the idea of preserving such a precious legacy had not yet caught on.

In 1949, when my "Index" to Sternberg's films was published by the British Film Institute, the general critical assessment of his works had fallen to its lowest level. For instance, Lewis Jacobs, in his 1939 film history *The Rise of the American Film*, condemned Sternberg's later Dietrich films as tracing "the gradual withering of a talent who has withdrawn into an ivory tower. . ." Jacobs called these films "tonal tapestries, two-dimensional fabrications valuable only for their details." It was against such a background that my pioneering reassessment of Sternberg's work ushered in a whole new era of appreciation for his films. No one today would dispute the importance and uniqueness of his work. His lighting, complex styling, and staging would forever be an influence on my own films.

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The war came to an end, and it was time for me to finish my education. A decision had to be made: I had to either continue my training as a dentist or change my direction completely. After much soul-searching, I decided that I would rather try to do what I wished to do and fail than pursue a financially successful career in something that did not in the least interest me. Although quite rightfully dubious of the outcome, my kind parents let me follow my heart. Instead of enrolling in the Dental School at the University of Southern California, I became a student in the Cinema Department.

In the 1940s, there were few, if any, other film departments in America's universities. There were theater departments galore but few devoted to training for a motion picture career. Befitting its experimental status, the USC Cinema Department was housed in a small group of wartime Quonset huts on the edge of the campus.

I was able to take courses in screenwriting, cinematography, film editing, and direction, taught by a motley crew of Hollywood old-timers like William de Mille and his wife, Clara Beranger, whose orientation was toward the silent era of filmmaking rather than the talkies. We benefited more from the

occasional lectures given by people currently involved in their own careers, such as Loretta Young, Mae West, and Josef von Sternberg himself. The film school sponsored a yearly black-tie dinner that honored distinguished figures from the film industry. I was present at one of the most notable of these in which Mae West was honored. She arrived at the event accompanied by a personally chosen group of handsome USC football players, and George Cukor interviewed her about her career. Another year, Gloria Swanson was similarly honored in a vivid evening of reminiscence.

Meanwhile, my friend Kenneth Anger was secretly making his first significant film. *Fireworks* was well calculated to cause a buzz of shock and astonishment wherever it was shown. Kenneth appeared in his own film, which was deeply personal in its content. I decided then that I would make my own very personal film, which would become *Fragment of Seeking*. I wrote the script, hired the use of a Bell and Howell 16mm camera, and designed the continuity to make use of the Casa de Rosa as a setting. The Casa was an old dormitory with a labyrinth of rooms and corridors on Hoover Street that later became a home for unwed mothers. My theme was adolescent narcissism, and, as a Jungian analyst later pointed out to me, the film dealt with the *anima* and *animus* of Jungian terminology.

I appeared in my film as its protagonist, just as Kenneth had done in *Fireworks*. The appearance of the filmmaker as the principal character in many post-World War II avant-garde films is now seen as characteristic of this movement, spearheaded by Maya Deren in the 1940s. Maya Deren was the doyenne of this era of cinema in the United States and I would not deny that her films were an inspiration for me and a model for what I wanted to do. She published a small chapbook called *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* that articulated the aims of her films and their use of the medium's creative idiom.

I likened my work in these early years to lyrical poetry. It seemed ridiculous to compete with Hollywood at its own game of the narrative feature, and anyway, what really interested me was to see if there were more daring and original ways of using film than could be seen in conventional Hollywood product. In addition to Maya Deren, my sources of inspiration included Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, Cocteau's *The Blood of a Poet*, and

Mme. Germaine Dulac's *La Coquille et le Clergyman*, even though at the time I had only read about these films.

I made *Fragment of Seeking* entirely on my own even though I was presently enrolled in USC. When I finally showed the film to one of my professors, he had no comment to make about it. He was film industry-oriented, and this film bore no resemblance to anything to which he was accustomed. It certainly was not something the "Department" would sponsor, so he simply thanked me for showing it to him and nothing more was said about it. It did not affect my status as a student one way or another.

Even though my film had aroused no interest at USC, one day Kenneth Anger informed me that we were both invited to show our films at a private gathering of fellow artists and intellectuals at the Schindler House in Beverly Hills. Now a center for the arts owned by the Austrian government as their cultural outpost in Los Angeles, the Schindler House was then still the private residence of Schindler's widow. The guests that evening included the crème de la crème of the artistic scene in Los Angeles: Peter Yates, the founder of the modern music concerts known as "Evenings on the Roof"; two famous dancers, Carmelita Maracci and Merce Cunningham; the composer John Cage; and various sundry others.

Mrs. Schindler ignored the films and spent her time during their projection preparing her tea table. Hence, she had no idea why her emergence from the kitchen after the showing was met with a stunned and stony silence. Everyone in the room was too shocked to say a word. Kenneth and I were kept waiting in the anteroom while we wondered what had happened. I told Kenneth that I felt like taking my pants off and walking out in front of everyone to really give them a shock. I was angry.

After a very long time, John Cage was delegated to speak to us. He took us out into the garden where we could be alone. "You must understand that these films are not art," he said. "Art has to do with clouds and trees and beautiful things." He repeated, "These films are not art."

I felt like saying, "Isn't that funny? I thought they were."

Nearly no one else present would speak to us, so we took our projector and films and went home. A few days later, Mrs. Schindler called Kenneth and told him coldly, "We just want

you to know that we have discussed your films and have decided that you are two very sick boys.”

A few months later, Kenneth embarked for Paris where Jean Cocteau acclaimed *Fireworks* as a film that “touches the true night of the soul.” In France, Kenneth would find the appreciation and understanding that his own country could not give him. It was the American artist’s experience of Paris in the 1920s all over again—as a land where the contribution of artists is honored rather than disdained.

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As I raced toward graduation, I developed an active social life outside the university, whose animator was a delightful little gadfly named Jimmy Hulse. I never quite knew what Jimmy did — I think something vaguely to do with public relations — but he seemed to know everyone, and I got to meet his friends. Jimmy took me to meet Bobby Short at the beginning of his career when he was appearing in a small bar downtown (where I had my first mixed drink, a whiskey sour). He introduced me to Paul Mathison, a handsome young blond artist who was living with a glamorous Viennese woman named Renate Druks, who looked and sounded exactly like Luise Rainer. It was at Paul and Renata’s house that I went to bed with Grady Galloway.

Grady was a student at USC and a football player. Attraction to another person is a very personal thing, and so I can only say that he seemed to me to be the most attractive man I had ever met. My memory of it is of a true *coup de foudre*. This French expression might be freely translated as “being struck in the head with an iron mallet.” It is not easy to recover from such a blow. And in point of fact, I never did. I only presume to write about this early sexual experience because of the extraordinary impact it made on me. And the impact was this: I knew immediately, with a truly horrible kind of prescience, that I was doomed to never again have such an intense experience of passion, and that I would feel an emptiness because of it for the rest of my life. Indeed, the bleakness I felt at the center of my heart thereafter was never to be relieved.

Grady made love to me a few times, and I hoped that he



might let me share an apartment with him. He worked part-time at Dolores, the legendary drive-in on Wilshire Boulevard. I would go there and order a hamburger and Coke just to see him, however briefly. Eventually, he found someone else to be his companion. I couldn't imagine what he saw in this other fellow, but the brutal truth I had to face was that he chose someone other than me. I would still run into him from time to time, but I gave up the thought of capturing him. I remember sitting in a car with him one night, and unburdening my heart. He accepted the expression of my feelings with grace and kindness, but of course nothing changed. I knew he liked me, and had even been physically attracted to me, but it was not enough. He finally moved up to San Francisco and became involved in Democratic Party politics, and I lost track of him.

A group of friends that revolved around the orbit of Jimmy Hulse met regularly at a delicatessen in Hollywood called the Gotham. I was always on a limited student budget, but I found that I could nevertheless eat very well at the Gotham by ordering a turkey wing. A turkey wing is pretty large and has an amazing amount of meat on it, and it was the cheapest thing of its kind on the menu. Various people would join our little group from time to time, and one evening I met an extraordinarily beautiful girl named Jana Garth.

We felt an instant rapport with each other. Jana lived in San Francisco and was in Los Angeles trying for a career in the movies. She had been active in a little theater group in San Francisco where she had played the title role in George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*. One could instantly see that she was perfectly cast for the role. George Cukor happened to be visiting San Francisco and noticed her in a restaurant, sent his card over to her, and suggested she look him up if ever she came to Hollywood.

She took advantage of his offer, and he put her in touch with Howard Hawks, who placed her under personal contract. It was Hawks who had discovered and made a star out of Lauren Bacall and was responsible for Bacall's low, provocative voice. He had lowered its pitch by sending her into the hills to yell until she was hoarse, and now he had Garth doing the same thing. Lowering the female voice was kind of an obsession with him. As I had learned from my drama teacher at Occidental, so

few American women naturally have low, pleasing voices, and Hawks attempted to give his potential stars a trademark voice that instantly set them apart from ordinary women.

By the time I met Jana, however, she had already broken her contract with Hawks without appearing in a film. She was a fiery, willful girl, and when Hawks refused to give her the leading role in *Red River*, which she felt she deserved, she had walked out of his office and his contract. David O. Selznick took up the slack and was testing her face for *The Miracle of the Bells*. Jana was about eight years older than me and seemed to me a glamorous “older woman.” She invited me up to her flat in San Francisco on Telegraph Hill, and it was there that I made love for the first time to a woman. It was a perfectly pleasant experience but hardly a *coup de foudre*. She told me she had been having affairs with a number of different men in Los Angeles involved in the film industry. She was a free spirit, and we had an understanding between us. We were good companions who might or might not have sex as the spirit moved us, but this was affection, not love.

Back in Los Angeles, she invited me to be her escort at Sam Spiegel’s last great Hollywood party. You can read about this party in *LIFE* magazine’s “Life Goes to a Party” series. I was truly dazzled. Spiegel had erected a large tent over his swimming pool, which had been covered with a dance floor. All of Hollywood was there. I met Shirley Temple and John Agar, Arnold Pressburger (who had recently produced Sternberg’s *The Shanghai Gesture*), and even the great Charlie Chaplin. Ever the film scholar, I asked Pressburger what had become of Sternberg’s *The Sea Gull*, which he had produced. He explained that it had been destroyed as a tax write-off. I also met Jennings Lang, an important executive at Universal with whom Jana had been having a part-time affair under his wife’s nose. It was Jennings who hit the headlines later when he had his balls shot off by Walter Wanger, the jealous husband of Joan Bennett.

We arrived at the party in a taxi but were driven home by James Cagney’s brother, William. In the car, Jana broke the news to me: still another screen test had failed to launch her career. The part she was up for in *The Miracle of the Bells* had been given to an Italian actress, Alida Valli. She told me they

were afraid she was too much like Katharine Hepburn. She did have a similar quality but was not in any way a conscious imitation. She had gotten money from Sam Spiegel to go to Europe. Perhaps she'd be more appreciated there, where the specter of Hepburn did not reign so strongly. After she left, except for a rare postcard, I did not hear from her again.

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Not long after my departure for college from Beaumont, my parents left there also and moved to Brawley, California, a small agricultural community in the Imperial Valley near the Southern Mexican border. While Beaumont had no real industry to support it, Brawley was a vital part of America's breadbasket and was thriving and wealthy. My father once again became the town's city attorney and profited accordingly. I seldom visited Brawley, because the heat in the summer was staggering, and since I hadn't ever lived there, the community meant nothing to me. Nevertheless, on one of my visits there, I attended the bullfights over the Mexican border in Mexicali. It was there I discovered the breathtaking landscape at the edge of the Salton Sea.

The scenario for my film *On the Edge* was instantly born. By now I had acquired a Bolex H-16 camera of my own, so there was nothing, other than arranging the physical circumstance of the shooting, to prevent me from making the film. In addition to the location, a further inspiration was its score: Charles Ives's "The Housatonic at Stockbridge." I designed the continuity of the film to match the music and edited it accordingly. I did my own camerawork and roped my parents into playing the two characters in the film. They were perfect for what I needed, and I took secret pleasure in committing their image on film in this way.

The settings and all their physical details are extremely important in my films, including my features. When I had no money, finding locations for my films both inspired their content and made the filming of them practical. Hollywood scripts are, for the most part, written for generic locations that are only found or constructed after the fact. My early short films were all inspired by their settings, chosen before my

scripts were written.

This is especially true of another of my short films, *Picnic*, in which I used bleak locations to stage my satire of middle-class life and false love. I needed settings that conveyed the world of dreams — both its hallucinatory and desolate qualities. I shot a rocky beach north of Malibu, the desert of Imperial Valley, and the remains of a burned-out house. Some of these places were private property, so we always had a lookout and occasionally had to do some fast talking. I again cast my parents, as well as a boy in whom I had a brief romantic interest named Hugh.

When *Picnic* was completed, my parents, Kenneth Anger, and I traveled to San Francisco together for a premiere of the film. It showed on a program with other experimental filmmakers of the time, including Christopher Young, Claire Falkenstein, and Sidney Peterson, whose *The Lead Shoes* I found to be unpleasant and depraved. *Picnic* showed directly after *The Lead Shoes* to an audience grown restless by the proceeding monstrosity. After it was over, however, I overheard several complimentary words spoken of my film, and I knew it had been a strong enough statement to overcome the unfortunate order of the program.

\* \* \*

When I graduated from USC, I moved to Hollywood and rented a room in a large clapboard mansion in the Hollywood Hills that had been converted to a rooming house. My landlady was an old harriidan who had a dull-witted fortyish son who did the handiwork that kept the building from crumbling to pieces. The house — long demolished now — was where the DeMille barn now stands as a headquarters for the Hollywood Entertainment Museum on Highland Avenue. This area is at the foot of Whitley Heights, a residential district above Hollywood Boulevard that I found endlessly fascinating. Legend has it that Whitley Heights was conceived by a real estate entrepreneur in the 1920s who wanted to recreate some of the splendors of the South of France and the Italian Riviera. It lives well up to its founder's ambitions.

I used to explore its maze of winding roads on foot. Some of the houses had names like Villa Chauve-Souris, with an emblem of a bat painted on the wall, and the Villa Valambrosa,

a small Venetian-style palace that I later used as the exterior in my Poe-inspired film, *Usher*. Occasionally, I would encounter some of the residents of these villas, one of whom was a British lady who explained to me that she had been gassed in World War I and told by her British doctor to immigrate to California where she could breathe clean air to help heal her poisoned lungs. By the time I met her, the ubiquitous California smog had begun to creep in, and her clean-aired paradise was no more. Nevertheless, she soldiered on. She had dug into her trunks to find her World War I military outfit, which though we were in the midst of World War II, she wore to scan the skies for enemy aircraft flying over Los Angeles.

Among the other residents I met was Carl Junghans, a German film director whom I had read about, noted for one apparently extraordinary silent film, *Takový je život* (*Such Is Life*). I encountered him at a private screening of his latest film, *Monuments of the Past*, a poetic documentary on the Hopi Indians featuring clouds racing over the landscapes of New Mexico, an effect accomplished by stop-motion photography. He and his wife lived in one of the smaller villas of Whitley Heights, and they invited me into their home. He was a sweet man who had no doubt been destined for greater things (and films) that never happened. He was passionately enthusiastic about what he was doing, but I was not interested in clouds, however beautiful they might be.

Another resident was Edith Breckenridge, a widow who also lived in one of the smaller villas. She was actually twice a widow; her second husband, Mr. Breckenridge, had been a pilot and a victim of the recent war. But her first husband was Samuel Hoffenstein, an American poet who had come to Hollywood to work as a screenwriter at the beginning of talkies. I was interested in him because he was credited with the screenplay of Sternberg's *Morocco*. Edith told me fascinating stories about being on the set when Sternberg was working intensively with Dietrich to erase her German accent, teaching her how to pronounce her words phonetically. Perhaps this is why her dialogue in the film is delivered in such a slow and languorous way. Edith had marvelous social connections and seemed to be invited everywhere. Occasionally, she would let me be her escort. This inevitably

led to my exposure to the gossip about her. She had impeccable social credentials but had lost her money and was now forced to live on canapés and hors d'oeuvres. Eventually, she had to sell her lovely Whitley Heights villa and move to an apartment in the no-man's-land of East Hollywood. She took her elegant furnishings with her, but they lost their luster in the second-rate setting.

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It was through Betty Harford, a young actress friend who had been studying with Michael Chekhov, that I met Iris Tree. Iris was the daughter of the great Shakespearean actor Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree. She was known for her great beauty and had been a sought-after artists' model. Now she lived a bohemian lifestyle in Ojai, California, where she often invited members of the Los Angeles intellectual and artistic elite for weekend getaways. Betty felt that I might qualify to be included on one of these jaunts. It was an enticing prospect, but being a fastidious Virgo — put on guard at the mention of the word “bohemian”— I said I would love to go *if* I could be assured of clean sheets.

Soon I received a phone call from Iris extending me an invitation, which I accepted with the caveat that I did not have a car. “Call up Christopher Isherwood,” she said. “He’s coming up and you can ride with him.” I called and he agreed to pick me up. He arrived accompanied by his boyfriend, Bill Caskey, a scrappy little guy who seemed to have more than a few rough edges. On the drive up to Ojai, I confessed with some embarrassment that I’d never read anything Christopher had written, but that I had just bought a copy of *Prater Violet*, which I intended to read shortly. I had chosen it because it was about the making of a film.

Once we arrived, Iris and her lover — an actor named Ford Rainey — greeted us warmly and installed us in side-by-side chairs on her front porch where we drank vodka, neat, and munched on slices of salami. I was immediately taken by Iris and her life in Ojai. Though middle-aged at the time with three grown children, Iris still possessed remnants of her once celebrated beauty. She had large eyes and high cheekbones

framed by blond hair in a pageboy bob. She wore the kind of simple cotton dress that I associated with the Oklahoma dust bowl, but on her it had style and charm. Ford was much younger than Iris and often played ranch hands in the movies. This was in marked contrast to her estranged husband, the Austrian aristocrat Friedrich von Ledebur. When we retired that first night, I discovered that Iris and Ford had kindly given me the master bedroom while they bedded down in the barn. I felt a pang of guilt when I found that the stiff new sheets still had their paper labels attached to them. Yes, Betty had told them all about me.

A few weeks later, Christopher unexpectedly invited me to dinner at the Sportsmen's Lodge. We talked about literature, Greta Garbo, Noel Coward, the most civilized countries, the political situation. Of course, mostly I plied him with questions about literature and literary figures. I liked him enormously. We became friends and would see each other from time to time for dinner and a movie. I introduced him to the films of von Sternberg. He seemed dazzled as I was by *The Scarlet Empress* and *The Devil Is a Woman*.

I decided to introduce him to James Whale, the legendary director of such films as *Frankenstein* and *The Invisible Man*. I had gotten to know James as an admirer of his films, and he frequently invited me to dine at his elegant home in Pacific Palisades. James was a British expatriate of great wit, who I believed would have much in common with Christopher. My friend Kenneth Anger and I had arranged to show James our short films one evening and invited Christopher along.

By this time, I had my own car and we picked Christopher up at his small house in Santa Monica Canyon. I smelled alcohol on his breath the moment he got into the car. Disturbed, I hoped nevertheless that this might mean no more than the prelude to a jolly evening. I was wrong.

We showed the films, and later at the dinner table, Christopher became rudely and brutally frank. For some reason, he had taken an instant aversion to James. He went on to express his likes and dislikes with drunken vehemence. At one point, he fixed James with a baleful eye and told us he had a new idea for one of my films. He described a scene in which Whale would emerge from a manhole in the street covered

with slime, his hair hideously matted like some sinister troll. His words dripped with malice and spite, and I, in turn, was mortified.

My well-meaning intention of bringing these two together was in shambles. I was too young and inexperienced to deal with the situation and just wanted to crawl under the table. Later James reassured me that he found the insults merely amusing, and it was not, after all, my fault. I was too embarrassed to ever discuss the incident with Christopher, and I never knew what motivated his animosity. Regardless, my friendship with Christopher continued, and later he was very supportive of my work, though our paths would ominously cross at a later date.

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From my Hollywood room, I enrolled as a graduate student in the Theatre Arts Department of UCLA in West Los Angeles. I took more cinema courses and began work toward a master's degree. For my master's thesis, I had two choices: make a short film or do research for a written thesis. Having already written successfully about Sternberg's work, I chose to write about another director noted for his pictorial style, Rex Ingram. His most famous work, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, made a star out of Rudolph Valentino.

This proved to be a foolish undertaking because it was very difficult to see Ingram's films. I managed to get MGM to give me a private projection of *The Conquering Power* and *The Garden of Allah*, but most of the rest of my research had to consist of reading old reviews and the estimates of other critics about Ingram's work. It was reading about his "pictorialism" that had intrigued me, but the style of his films was in other ways dull and pedestrian.

Before I was too far along with writing my thesis, it was aborted by the new head of the school's Film Department, Arthur Ripley. Ripley had directed a number of minor offbeat films beginning in the early thirties, a couple of W. C. Fields shorts, and in the forties had made an "art" film called *Voice in the Wind*. Later he made an exceedingly jumbled and unsuccessful suspense movie called *The Chase*, based on a



Cornell Woolrich story.

When he arrived at the school, one of the first orders of business was to review the master's theses in progress. He called me into his office to tell me that he did not find Ingram's work worthy of a thesis and that I must choose another subject. Having had previous approval of my project, and having already spent a considerable amount of time and effort on it, I decided to chuck the whole thing. I wouldn't bother to get a master's degree. I didn't intend to teach anyway; I was really just killing time. I had to move on, and moving on for me meant going to New York.

## New York to Europe

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I pooled my resources with a couple of other students who also wanted to go to New York and started out across the country, going twenty-four hours a day by alternating drivers. I had just barely learned to drive at this point, so I don't think the other boys quite realized the jeopardy they had put themselves in with me at the wheel. Nevertheless, by some miracle of providence, we arrived three days later in Manhattan where we broke up and went our respective ways.

I had found a specialized film distributor, Brandon International, who agreed to distribute my films and arrange a number of screenings in the city. I rented a room at the Warwick Hotel a couple of blocks from the Museum of Modern Art. It was the summer of 1949, and I wasn't quite prepared for the shock of New York's hideously hot and humid weather. When in my room, I spent half the time sitting naked in front of a fan on an overstuffed chair, covered with a sheet to absorb sweat, and maintaining a diet that consisted mostly of blueberries, sour cream, and vanilla cookies.

I had met Anaïs Nin through Kenneth Anger in Los Angeles, so she was the first person I looked up. Until then, I had only met Anaïs's forest ranger lover Rupert Pole, but now I would meet the other half of her scandalous double life, her husband Hugo Guiler. Anaïs offered to give a cocktail party in my honor in their elegant Greenwich Village apartment. Hugo was a tall, gray-haired gentleman whom I took to immediately. Although by profession he was a banker, he had illustrated some of his wife's books with his drypoint etchings. His interest and involvement in the arts had lately switched to filmmaking, so it turned out that we had a great deal in common. As for Anaïs, she was the soul of charm as she introduced me to a collection of her friends, mostly poets and painters, as well as a writer

who had recently created a splash with his daring homosexually themed novel, *The City and the Pillar*, Gore Vidal. Gore was handsome and charming but already had a palpable air of superiority that I found intimidating. Still, it was a thrilling beginning for my arrival in New York.

The next person I contacted was Maya Deren, whom I had corresponded with while in Los Angeles. We had lunch in a Greenwich Village café, and she told me of her admiration for my film *On the Edge*. Maya, with her great head of frizzy hair, looked exactly as she did in her films. As I chatted with her, I couldn't help thinking of Man Ray's casual dismissal of her work, but mum was the word. She had been a great inspiration for me. Although we had much in common in our filmmaking efforts, as a personality she was opinionated and difficult, a far cry from the warmth and kindness of Anaïs. Nevertheless, she invited me to a party she was giving in the near future.

I made friends quickly in New York through my film screenings. One was a most sympathetic and important film critic, Arthur Knight, who wrote for the *Saturday Review*. I told him of my desire to see Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr*, a film I had read a great deal about. I figured that there ought to be a print of it somewhere in New York, and I managed to track it down in the vault of an obscure distributor, under the title *The Adventures of David Gray*. Arthur helped me arrange a screening of *Vampyr* for Iris Barry at the Museum of Modern Art Film Library, since she also had been most curious to see it. The film, made in France in 1931, takes place in a kind of netherworld of strange atmospheric effects — dancing shadows and spectral figures. It was an unfortunately truncated version, dubbed in English, but it was enough to give a good idea of what an astonishing and unique film it was.

The leading player in *Vampyr* is billed as "Julian West." So you can imagine my shock a few days later when I was in a projection room to see a preview showing of a new film, and Julian West himself walked in and sat down in the seat directly in front of me. It seemed uncanny; I could hardly believe my eyes! I gathered my courage and leaned forward in my seat: "Excuse me, sir, but did you appear in a film called *Vampyr*?" He turned and smiled. In a very deep voice, he replied, "That was a very long time ago." It was only much later that I

discovered his true identity. "Julian West" was the Baron Nicolas de Gunzburg. As a young man, he had helped finance *Vampyr* and played the leading role in it. I do not know if he contemplated a continuing career as an actor, but this was his only appearance in a film. He later became a fashion editor for *Vogue* magazine.

A pretty and ambitious aspiring actress friend of mine, Tamar Cooper, arrived in New York and moved into the Rehearsal Club on 46th Street just around the corner from where I was living. The Rehearsal Club was the prototype of a residence for young actresses and had served as the setting for the play and film *Stage Door*. Tamar and I had been slight acquaintances in Los Angeles but became closer in New York. As her friend, I was allowed to eat my meals cheaply in the Rehearsal Club dining room, and we attended many parties together on the New York circuit.

One of the party givers was Leo Lerman, whom I had met at Anaïs Nin's. Leo was then an editor at *Mademoiselle*, and I invited him to one of the screenings of my three short films. He liked them and included my picture in an article called "Who's New." After this, I managed to land on his party list, which was a great honor as it included many of the leading lights of Broadway and the literary world. At Leo's I met a loquacious and jolly Tennessee Williams, and his dear friend Carson McCullers, fresh from her success on Broadway with her play *The Member of the Wedding*. Carson was strange and angular, her large eyes piercing as she slowly walked across the room with her shoulders bent, holding her cigarette. At one party I was introduced to Hans von Twardowski, of interest to me because he had played the young hero in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. He was with Eleonora von Mendelssohn, a German actress who, it was rumored, carried on a fraught and convoluted relationship with Twardowski and her husband, the Hollywood actor Martin Kosleck (who was suspected of also being his lover). The sophistication of this was all a bit beyond my experience and understanding, but I enjoyed it nonetheless.

At another screening of my films, I met a young Greek-American who called himself Themistocles Hoetis. The name alone would have been enough to intrigue me, but he swept me off my feet with a huge liking for my films and for me.

Themistocles was a poet and became a sort of mentor to me. He took me to bed and began to fill my head with wondrous tales of the world of mysticism. He told me about George Gurdjieff, a spiritual guru with whom I was not yet familiar. Themistocles was reading Gurdjieff's masterwork trilogy, *All and Everything*, which he warned me was beyond my understanding at the present stage of my development. He suggested I start my spiritual education by reading P. D. Ouspensky's *A New Model of the Universe*.

I told Anaïs of my new interest, but she and Hugo warned me against any exploration in this area. They felt it was a dead end. They were only interested in what they deemed to be the scientific facts of psychoanalysis. They even warned me against the mysticism inherent in the psychoanalytic work of Dr. Jung, but they failed to stem my growing curiosity about the esoteric — that which lies hidden beneath the surface of life.

Themistocles's ideas filled me with a breathless sense of urgency — as to what or why I wasn't quite sure. He told me that I must go to Paris. He was going, and I could join him there. My friend Kenneth Anger was in Europe. We had been corresponding and he had written me about the warm reception his films had gotten there. Would mine be similarly received? I had enjoyed my time in New York, but it seemed to me something — Kenneth, Themistocles — was pulling me in the direction of Europe. As before, it was time to move on. I began to plot my escape.

By this time, I shared a flat with a friend named Robert. He was a bland and uninteresting personality with whom I had a friendship of convenience. My parents kindly sent me a small allowance that was enough to pay for my food, lodging, and other essentials, but this was because I was ostensibly looking for work in New York. I knew my parents' pride would make them threaten me with a cessation of my income if I mentioned the frivolous idea of going to Paris. But I also knew my parents well enough to be certain that they would continue to send me money if I avoided confronting them with my decision. Therefore, I wrote them a series of carefully spaced letters that Robert would mail regularly from New York while I was on the boat to France. They would continue to believe that I was in New York until suddenly they would receive a letter

postmarked from Paris. To save extra money for my trip, I lived my last days in New York on nothing but canned beef and tuna.

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I booked a third-class passage on *La Liberté*, a French *paquebot*. Its first-class accommodations were as elegant as those in any ocean liner at the time, but the third class was only one step away from steerage. I was assigned to a small cabin with four bunks in it. The night of our departure was in February, and as we embarked a storm was brewing. Once out of the harbor and on the high seas, the wind, rain, and lightning hit with a vengeance, and the ship began to lurch and stagger like a drunkard on rubbery legs. Everyone got sick, including the crew members. You could hear the sounds of retching echoing in the corridors between cabins, and it was not long before I, too, was vomiting my guts out.

The next morning all was calm, and though still feeling nauseated, I was determined to go down to breakfast. I had been living so long on canned food that the thought of having a freshly cooked meal was hugely enticing. I was very aware that the cost of my ticket included all meals, and I wanted my money's worth. The other gentlemen in the cabin remained moaning in their beds. One of them didn't get up during the whole of the remaining six-day voyage. But I quickly found my sea legs and discovered the glories of French cuisine. It was my introduction to enjoying wine with every meal, and I especially remember my first-time delight at the taste and texture of a gooey slice of brie. At night after dinner, we would watch a French film, and I was startled to see nudity on the screen that had invariably been cut out of the French films I had seen in New York.

On the last night, before landing at Le Havre, it was the custom of the ship to give a gala party, even for the third class passengers. At the party, crew members participated in a pantomime portraying a typical French wedding. The husband was played as a drunkard, but by a woman, not a man. This was because her head was hidden by an oversize top hat, and her body was made up to be the face of the drunkard, his pop eyes being her naked breasts. The whole show was bawdy and

wonderful. I was rapidly falling in love with the French people.

When the train from Le Havre arrived at the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris, Themistocles was waiting. It was night, and my first glimpses of the fabled city were incredibly exotic to me. He took me to a small hotel on the Left Bank that seemed like something I had seen in my dreams (and French films). There was a smoke-filled bar on the first floor peopled with garishly made-up prostitutes and sailors who grasped the buttocks of the girls they danced with. Later I saw photographs by Brassai of Paris in the thirties, and I recognized exactly what I witnessed that night.

The room upstairs had gaudy wallpaper and patterned curtains of crocheted linen. The bed was an iron one, with a mattress that sagged horribly in the middle, bursting my back. There was only a pitcher and bowl to perform one's ablutions and the toilet was a shared facility at the end of the hall. The war had just recently ended, and in a third-class hotel, torn bits of newspaper served in lieu of the nice rolls of soft white paper that one took for granted in America.

During the next few days, Themistocles took me around and introduced me to his friends. Our hotel was located in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the center for the new young intellectual crowd. I quickly became accustomed to lingering over coffee at the Café de Flore and Les Deux Magots. In 1950, there was another café across the street called Café Royale. The prices here were slightly less than those at the Magots and the Flore, so I spent most of my time there. Themistocles also haunted a gay bar just down the street called La Reine Blanche. There he introduced me to a young, unpublished black American writer named James Baldwin who lived in another part of Paris because he couldn't afford the cost of a hotel room in Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

I also met Ned Rorem, an incredibly good-looking young American composer who seemed to be on intimate terms with a French world that was very far from the one we inhabited — the Proustian world of the French aristocracy. His close friend was the Vicomtesse Marie-Laure de Noailles. Though very handsome, Ned's looks had a marshmallow softness that I did not find attractive, and he seemed to be drunk most of the time. He was also arrogant and bitchy, but with his talent and

looks, who could blame him?

Kenneth Anger had preceded me to Paris and now we met again. He introduced me to an extraordinary Russian woman, Mary Meerson, with whom I had an instant rapport. Mary was the companion and right hand of Henri Langlois, the founder and director of the Cinémathèque Française. The Cinémathèque was located at 7 Avenue de Messine, a large building in the Haussmann style, which had at least four stories. The first floor contained the reception area and a theater that showed rare films from all over the world every day and night. The other floors of the labyrinthine building housed offices and storage facilities and god only knows what else. Access to the upper floors was by a small, creaking cage-like elevator and a maze of hidden back stairways. I soon came to know my way around this cave, and sometimes late at night after I had seen some unique treasure of the cinema repertory, I would join Mary upstairs in her cluttered office. She would send me out to buy her a sandwich made from bread that she called *pain mie*, which I always found odd because *pain mie* turned out to be American-style sliced bread. I couldn't understand why anyone would prefer that to the delicious traditional French baguette.

Mary was an impressively large woman with long, straight dirty blond hair and a booming voice that could be heard throughout the building when she rode in the elevator and called out, "Henri! Je veux te voir toute de suite!" ("Henri! I want to see you immediately!") She dressed in the most nondescript fashion one could imagine — usually a shapeless, long dark coat as protection against the cold of the poorly heated building. I could hardly believe it when Kenneth told me that Mary had once been a beautiful and fashionably dressed woman. She had been married to Lazare Meerson, the brilliant Russian set designer whose name can be found on such delightful René Clair films as *Sous les toits de Paris* and *Le million*, but he died while still a young man. Now she devoted her life to the legendary French film library. I adored Mary and came to think of her as my substitute mother away from home.

My friendship with Themistocles continued, but any intimacy between us ceased, a matter of attrition more than anything else. So I think it was with a certain amount of calculation on his part that he introduced me to a good-looking and very



charming young man from Lausanne named Jeannot Eicher. Jeannot did not speak a word of English so I had to communicate with him as best I could in my very limited high school French. This hardly impeded another universal language being spoken between us, and soon Jeannot moved into my hotel room with me. He was a delightful, intelligent companion and my best possible source for learning French.

Astonishingly, this was a time in Paris in which the dollar was so favored against the French franc that I was able to live quite well. I paid rent at the Hotel d'Isly on the rue Jacob and bought meals for both Jeannot and myself at the cheaper restaurants of the quarter, simply on the occasional twenty-dollar bill my mother still sent me. I exchanged my dollars on the black market, going to a certain photo shop where the money exchange took place in a darkened back room, which helped increase my affluence considerably.

One day Jeannot took me to meet Consuelo de Saint Exupéry, the Spanish widow of the author of *The Little Prince*. With my limited but growing understanding of French, I still could hardly understand her because she spoke French with a heavy Spanish accent. She lived in an elegantly furnished apartment in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and I have never forgotten a touch of her unexpectedly beautiful décor: by her fireplace, she had two large orange pumpkins. She took us to dinner at the Brasserie Lipp, a legendary restaurant with a turn-of-the-century design. Jeannot and I could never have afforded to eat there, so it was a real treat, not only for the food, but for an insider's glimpse of *le tout Paris*. More than fifty years later, it had the same décor and the same social cachet but of course with prices that had risen considerably.

Most of my evenings were spent at the Cinémathèque or sitting at a café watching the colorful passing parade. Often I would find myself seated next to an American or European writer whom I had only read about. One evening it was Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Allen Tate; another time it was Liam O'Flaherty, the Irish writer. The night André Gide died, it seemed that the whole quarter was plunged into gloom. Word of his demise had spread like wildfire, long before the next day's newspapers.

It was too late for me to meet Gertrude Stein, and I didn't

know anyone who might introduce me to Alice B. Toklas, but when a new production of *Four Saints in Three Acts* was announced at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, I rushed to the box office to buy a ticket. The night of the performance, I waited outside the theater to watch the fashionable crowd arrive. By an incredible stroke of luck, a chauffeured car arrived and disgorged Miss Alice Toklas herself. She was very tiny and dressed in what had to be a Poiret gown from the 1920s.

Another night, Kenneth Anger took me to a performance of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, with Jean Cocteau appearing in person reading the text that accompanied the music. Cocteau had also created a *pantomime en tableau* on a platform above and behind the orchestra that consisted of performers wearing giant masks representing the characters of the myth. It was a daring performance, and a sizable segment of the audience began to boo. Kenneth explained to me that in Paris there was a large anti-Cocteau clique, and they were taking this occasion to make themselves known. In the resulting hubbub, in which people who were for Cocteau began audibly shushing the others, the performance came to a halt. I remember how Cocteau stood absolutely still with an air of calm dignity as he faced the increasingly bawdy audience. It was a breathtaking moment. In the face of his silent dignity, the audience finally quieted down. When he could finally be heard, Cocteau said, "Mr. Stravinsky and I have created this work with a sense of respect for the public. All we ask in return is the audience's respect when we perform it." The audience then burst into applause and the performance continued.

Afterward, Kenneth, whose work as a filmmaker had been greatly praised by Cocteau, took me backstage to meet him. I remember Cocteau's graciousness, and how in those few moments when I spoke to him and told him of my admiration for his work, he gave me his undivided attention. Then Kenneth and I, along with two or three other friends of Cocteau, walked outside through the backstage entrance. On the way we passed a large, enclosed trunk of the type that would be used to transport scenery. Cocteau gestured at it. "Sarah Bernhardt," he said, "used to tour in a van like that."

Of all my theatrical experiences in Paris the most meaningful to me was my attendance of a performance of *Grand Guignol* at the legendary theater of the same name in the Pigalle neighborhood. It was the custom at the theater to program both a horror play and a short comic play on the same evening. The horror play I saw had to do with a man who always wore a black glove covering his left hand. An unknown assailant, meanwhile, brutally murders a series of young women by tearing their throats out, an act that is presented onstage with vivid effects of streaming blood. In the end it is revealed that the murder weapon is a hairy claw with long fingernails hidden, of course, under the black glove.

The comic play, which was called *GAI, GAI, Pendons-nous!* (roughly translated as *Goody, Goody, Let Us Hang Ourselves!*), was about a disconsolate bride whose husband finds himself unable to perform his husbandly duties on their wedding night. He is so distraught over his inability to perform that he runs offstage and hangs himself. A short while later, he and his bride return, and she is deliriously happy. I found myself unable to understand this play at all and attributed it to my limited understanding of French. It was only some years later that I learned the legend of the effect of strangulation on the male genitalia.

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It was becoming more and more difficult to manage in Paris on my limited income, and one day Jeannot suggested that we go down to the south of France. He knew a wealthy older woman there who might put us up for a while. A good idea, I agreed, but two train tickets would be expensive, probably more than we could manage. That didn't matter, Jeannot assured me, because we would hitchhike all the way. And so, carrying a couple of satchels of clothes, we embarked on the roads of France. We were first picked up by a truck driver on his way south to Marseille. Even in France people tended to be wary of picking up strangers in their car, but truck drivers were much more easygoing in this regard, perhaps because theirs was a lonely business and strangers helped pass the time. As the trip progressed, I grew quite fascinated by our little adventure.

Besides truck drivers, we would most often be picked up by country priests driving their little two-horsepower French cars (quite the ugliest little vehicles I've ever seen). We spent what little money we had on food and slept nights in the cheapest hotels we could find. At last we arrived in Aix-en-Provence.

Aix is celebrated as one of the most beautiful towns of Provence in the south of France. Its main street, the Cours Mirabeau, is lined with tall plane trees that provide a luxuriant cover of cool shade in the summertime. There are the usual series of sidewalk cafés, various little boutiques, and *tabacs*. Jeannot's wealthy friend turned out to be the British painter Meraud Guevara, who drove in from the country to meet us. She was a small woman with a lined face, and she immediately put me at ease with her warm greeting. Meraud was the black sheep of the Guinness family, who had defied convention by going off to the Slade School to learn her craft as a painter. Her brother was Loel Guinness, who kindly provided her with a stipend to live on and occasionally invited her for excursions on his yacht. She told us that we were welcome to use her apartment, which was above the Roi Rene bar on the Cours Mirabeau. It was empty at the moment because she was staying just outside of Aix in her country house, La Tour de Cesar, so we happily moved in.

Jeannot was also friendly with Meraud's husband, Álvaro "Chile" Guevara, who had his own flat in another part of town. Álvaro was a Chilean (hence his nickname) who had lived many years in England and made a name for himself as a painter and amateur boxer. He had painted a famous portrait of Edith Sitwell that is in the collection of the Tate. He was tall and thin and had strong Indian features that seemed carved of wood. I was to learn later that he was not well, though he never let on. We developed a kind of routine in which Jeannot and I would meet at the market mornings and accompany Chile on his rounds of shopping. Jeannot carried Chile's shopping bag and sometimes, when Chile wasn't looking, he pilfered a few coins from the coin purse at the top of the bag. This helped stretch our meager budget. We felt rather self-righteous about this, because we knew that Chile had plenty of money. Although he could plainly see that we had to scrimp on food, he never offered to help us out in any way. We regarded him as

an old miser.

Jeannot had told Chile about my short films, and he very kindly set about arranging a screening in the local town hall. He had been spending most of his time writing a *Dictionnaire Intuitif*, a work that dealt with the intuitive meaning of words rather than their dictionary definitions. Since the intuitive and the unconscious were such important elements in my films, I awaited his opinion with much trepidation, but after the screening he was all smiles. Apparently, my films were “intuitively” correct.

Meraud lived quite a separate life out in the country. La Tour de Cesar was named after a crumbling Roman tower that was on her property. The modest two-story house consisted of her studio, where she painted every day, a kitchen with a dining area, and several upstairs bedrooms. It faced a wide terrace with a large table under the trees and had a wonderful view of the valley surrounding it. In the distance one could see the fabled Mont Sainte Victoire immortalized by Cézanne in his famous series paintings of the same name.

Meraud had a couple living on the property who managed everything and cooked the meals. My French was constantly improving, but I still couldn't understand them because they spoke the heavily accented French of the *midi*. On the surface, this sounds like Italian rather than French, since the vowel sounds that are silent in Parisian French are pronounced. Meraud seemed to live the perfect life of a British expatriate in France. Every day we had lengthy lunches at the terrace table where we consumed great quantities of both white and red wine. I furthered my appreciation of French food and the French pattern of eating: appetizer, main course, salad, and then cheese or dessert. In California, and the U.S. at large, this order is most often reversed, with salad served before, rather than after, the main course. Yet I grew to prefer the French way, with salad serving to “clear the palate” before dessert.

A frequent visitor at the Tour de Cesar was William Einstein, an American painter who lived in Aix with his French wife. He had been a close friend of Alfred Stieglitz in New York during the heyday of Stieglitz's art gallery, 291. He was also close to Georgia O'Keeffe and during my stay in Aix he left a couple of times to visit her at her home in New Mexico. Besides the local

residents, Meraud frequently entertained visitors from other parts of the world. There was an extremely eccentric Spanish marquise, a royalist who had fled Franco and was plotting the return of the monarchy to Spain. She was an aggressive lesbian who seemed to expect Meraud to provide her with a female companion. Meraud balked at this, complaining that she had no intention of procuring for any of her guests. One day the marquise showed me the jacket of a book she had written about the Spanish War under a male pseudonym, featuring a photo of the marquise cross-dressed as a man, with a fake mustache to enhance the illusion.

A car arrived unexpectedly one day that expelled three extraordinary occupants: a beautiful young Italian countess, a handsome young American, and Caresse Crosby. They were on their way from Italy to visit Salvador Dalí in Spain. I had read about Caresse in *LIFE* magazine back in the States. She had lived for a while in an old Southern mansion in South Carolina where she had entertained Dalí as her houseguest. He had decorated her garden there in a surrealist fashion, with a grand piano suspended midair under a tree. The charming fast-talking young man was Bill Barker, one of those displaced Americans you find in Europe who seems to have no calling in life other than to meet the right people. In Caresse he had found just the person to fulfill his social needs. The young contessa, who spoke neither French nor English, contented herself with being prettily silent.

I learned that Caresse was an advocate of a “One World” movement which intended to do away with all political differences. She had declared a certain bit of land that she had bought in Greece “One World” territory, belonging to no particular nation, but the Greeks didn’t agree. It was still national Greek land as far as they were concerned. Now she was on her way to confer with Dalí to gain additional support for her cause. Their visit was brief, and soon they packed into their car and were gone. Later in the 1950s, when I was back in Hollywood, Caresse, Bill, and I became close friends.

A storm was brewing between Jeannot and me. I was falling in love for the first time in my whole life while he was doing the exact opposite, pulling away from me and becoming cool and distant. This caused enormous suffering on my part. I was

still inexperienced in the ways of love and could neither understand nor cope with what I felt. Jeannot confronted me one day with ambiguous words: “Je t’aime, mais tu m’empêche de t’aimer.” (“I love you, but you prevent me from loving you.”) What did he mean? What had I done to take away his love? I could not understand, nor would he enlighten me further. What he had said did no more than confirm my worst suspicions.

Then, like a life preserver thrown my way, I suddenly received word that I had been invited to the Venice Film Festival. Mary Meerson and Henri Langlois had arranged for me to be a correspondent for *Theatre Arts Magazine* in New York. I took the opportunity and fled in what seemed to me a blaze of glory. I caught the train in Marseille and rode along the coast of France through Villefranche, Menton, and Monte Carlo, then crossed over the border into Italy. It was my deliverance from the obsession and madness of love.

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So many people have written about the magical and unique beauty of Venice that I would feel utterly inadequate to attempt the same thing. I can only say that my first trip down the Grand Canal in a *motoscifo* was, for me, an awesome and breathtaking experience. I fell instantly in love with the city, and my devotion has never wavered. I did not, however, begin to explore the labyrinthine byways of Venice until later. I went directly on to the Lido where I had been assigned a small room in a hotel situated near the dock where the arrivals and departures took place. It was a modest hotel where minor journalists were billeted, not like the Excelsior, which hosted stars and important journalists.

I quickly fell into the rhythm of screenings, press conferences, and parties. I ran into some American friends from San Francisco who had a cabana on the beach where I spent most of my days. I also met a young American gadabout named Robin Joachim who made it his business to know everything and everybody. He told me that, among other things, he could get me into the Excelsior very cheaply if I didn’t mind staying in a maid’s room. Since the Excelsior Hotel was the very heart

of the Venice Film Festival, I gladly accepted his offer.

An assistant manager took me up in the hotel's cage-like elevator to the very top of the building under the eaves. My room had a low slanting ceiling, a tiny window looking out on the sea, and a lumpy cot. But it didn't matter. I was now a resident of the fabulous Excelsior Hotel, with its ornate Arabic architecture and enormous, elegant dining room where I breakfasted every morning and had lunch or dinner later in the day. There was a huge bathroom on the top floor where the maids drew my bath for me. Best of all, each evening I would go down the elevator in my dinner jacket and on each floor as we descended, would be joined by the famous and wealthy, none of whom suspected the humble circumstances from whence I came.

Before leaving Aix, William Einstein had given me a letter of introduction to Peggy Guggenheim. I looked her up, presented her with my letter, and was promptly invited to lunch. She lived in the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, an unfinished villa on the Grand Canal, which today houses her collection of art. Back then it was her private residence, and she lived there in great style surrounded by her collection of surrealist paintings. She seemed to be an uncommonly homely woman but with a forceful personality and generous nature. I liked her. When we were having coffee in the drawing room after lunch, I was surprised to look up and see a number of strangers gawking at us through a doorway, as if we were a group of zoo animals on display. Peggy saw my bewilderment and explained that she was opening her house to tourists at certain hours so they could see her paintings. She was used to it and carried on as if they weren't there. Another day, she invited me to watch the annual regatta from her terrace. It was a spectacular parade of boats and gondolas with colorful banners and flags fluttering in the wind, and I had a most favored vantage point.

Of the many films I saw during my 1950 and 1951 visits to the festival, I only remember two, and they both represented extraordinary discoveries. One was the first film I had ever seen of Ingmar Bergman's, *Summer Interlude*. This film intrigued me as a display of its director's sensibility and made me want to watch for his name in the future. The other was Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, which was, by contrast, a mature and



accomplished work of cinematic art and the talk of the Festival. Japanese films were little known in the western world at that time. While living in Los Angeles, I had already discovered some of Kurosawa's early films at a Japanese movie theater downtown. This still had not prepared me for the utter brilliance of *Rashomon* and the impact of Toshiro Mifune's powerful performance. I called my 1950 article for *Theatre Arts* "Made in Japan."

A dazzling array of movie celebrities came and went during the festival, including Toshiro Mifune (who spoke only Japanese), Ginger Rogers, Orson Welles, Louis Jourdan, and among the directors, René Clair. I found myself sitting on the beach with Clair one day, and I told him how much I loved the singing flowers in *À nous la liberté*. I was quite disillusioned when he told me he had recently reedited the film and that was the first scene he had cut out!

A gala party was given by the American contingent of the festival in a park on the Lido. The theme was American Indian life, and the grounds were decorated with a cluster of Indian teepees.

A group of Italian girls wearing skimpy buckskin loincloths and feathered headdresses waited on the guests. The food came from a huge barbecue pit dug into the ground, with a turning spit over it holding a side of beef. Among the guests were two of the denizens of Hollywood whom I would have least expected to see at a festival devoted to cinematic art: a bespectacled Herbert J. Yates, President of Republic Pictures, accompanied by his embarrassingly untalented mistress, Vera Hrubá Ralston.

The evening was an exotic one for the Europeans and made the Americans feel right at home. As the festivities wore on, colorful paper hats were distributed and the waitresses performed an Indian war dance to the beat of tom-toms. But while the girls were dancing, the beat of the drums began to be echoed by a rumbling of thunder in the skies. I looked up and could see the storm clouds rapidly gathering but hardly anyone else seemed to notice. And then it struck: a sudden deluge of water. The guests began to scream and run for cover. The teepees were only decorative and offered almost no protection from the water. There was only a kind of open shed at the side

of the grounds, and soon people were clustered like sardines under its roof. An Italian gentleman, carried away by the enforced confinement, took the opportunity to grope me.

The water damage was done. All the men wearing white summer dinner jackets were now dyed like Easter eggs from the colors streaming off the paper party hats. It was a disaster. Fortunately, I was one of the few whose jackets remained soggy but pristine white. I had neglected to put on my hat.

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Though I would have loved to stay in Venice longer, when the festival was over, my time there was as well. As luck would have it, another buoy was thrown my way. It had somehow been arranged that I would go to Munich to show my films at the Theatre fur Filmkunst. My stay in Europe had been gloriously extended.

The Venice Festival takes place in September, so I arrived in Munich just in time to attend the Oktoberfest carnival. It was like a German Expressionist nightmare — the fat, porky-pig faces of the good burghers of Bavaria gorging on sausages and guzzling huge tankards of beer, with their equally plump women ogling them lasciviously as they linked arms and swayed to the oomph-pa-pa music. At the sideshows of the garish event, I entered true *Caligari* territory. In one, a man made up to look like a waxwork moved mechanically when a nurse onstage plugged an electrical wire into a metal machine. She seemingly controlled the mechanical man's jerky movements by manipulating various dials on the machine. During a lull in the performance, I thought I detected a bemused smile on the face of the waxwork man as he gazed at his fascinated audience.

The Theatre fur Filmkunst was a small cinema in the center of Schwabing, then the heart of Munich's artistic and Bohemian community. The proprietor of the theater allowed me to stay in his apartment, which he shared with his wife and daughter. They were very kind and hospitable people, as were all the other Germans I met — quite different than those in the throes of Oktoberfest. It struck me as strange that these people who had so recently been America's sworn enemies were now the

kindest and most welcoming of all the people I had met in Europe.

My films were presented at a Sunday matinee, and afterward I met a most interesting group of artists and intellectuals, all of whom seemed fascinated by my films. Among these was Gustav Machatý, the Czechoslovakian director who had achieved notoriety by directing Hedy Lamarr in *Ecstasy*. I had seen a cut version of *Ecstasy* in Los Angeles and realized that although it was promoted as an exploitation sex shocker, it was, in fact, a sensitively made study of erotic frustration, dealing with a young bride whose husband is impotent and how she achieves sexual awakening and fulfillment with a handsome stranger. The scene that caused the greatest stir was one that suggested the woman achieves an orgasm through oral stimulation.

After Munich, I went to London to show my films, this time at the British Film Institute. In London I met fellow film enthusiasts Lindsay Anderson and Gavin Lambert, editors of the film magazine *Sequence*. In an unexpected and incredible act of kindness, they invited me to share their flat, which was on the upper floor of a mews house in Knightsbridge.

I also met Olwen Vaughan, who had once been the secretary of the British Film Institute and was now the proprietress of a private club near Piccadilly Circus called Le Petit Club Francais. It had become a gathering place for British Francophiles and boasted among its membership a few film personalities. One was the director Alexander Mackendrick, nicknamed Sandy, who had recently made *Tight Little Island* (aka *Whisky Galore*) and *The Man in the White Suit*. Olwen, who was quite a colorful character, often went to France to buy staples for her club's kitchen. She was also a friend of my friend Mary Meerson, and when I knew that she was going to visit her I sent along my regards. I was beginning to see that Europe was like its own "tight little island" and boasted an interlocking group of people who all seemed to know each other.

When James Whale visited London, Gavin Lambert and I put our heads together and arranged for a special screening of *The Old Dark House* in his honor. It was well attended and he received a standing ovation when it was over. In those days, screenings of this kind were rare. The era of film buffs, festival

tributes, and endless private screenings had yet to begin. So this man who had already been forgotten by Hollywood was given an inkling of how his work would continue to be remembered and honored. I think he was very touched.

Peter Noble and his wife Marianne Stone were friends whom I had met at the Venice Festival. Peter was, among many things, a journalist and wrote a newspaper column in which he began to report some of my filmmaking efforts. He was a jolly, lovable man with an infectious smile and a delightful personality. I simply adored him. It was only very rarely that one saw his darker side, displayed in moments of anger if his political ideals were brought into question. He was one of those idealistic communists who had yet to question the perfidy of Joseph Stalin.

My 16mm camera was always with me, silently urging me to make another film. Having often found my inspiration in the visual stimulation of a location, I looked at the bombed-out houses in St. John's Wood and decided that they provided a most provocative setting for a film. But what film? What subject? Unfortunately the visual stimulus, in this case, was not enough to provide a suggestion for the narrative of the film.

Aware that one of my great creative idols, Martha Graham, had often found inspiration in the mythology of legends, I decided to use *The Odyssey* as my story source. Odysseus's descent into Hades, and his encounter with the enchantress Circe, were perfect fundamental elements. I wrote a script and chose the locations. Since I didn't know enough people in London to cast the film without help, I enlisted the aid of friends who suggested not only their friends but actors as well. A young actor from the West End stage who later became a movie star agreed to play Ulysses, and Marianne Stone, who was a well-seasoned actress herself, played Circe.

I had not as of yet worked with actors. I had only used people who, naturally humble in their attitude since they had never acted before, easily followed my directions. They were willing puppets. Now I had to deal with performers who needed to understand the motivation behind their actions, and I was hard put to provide it. Unfortunately, I found that explaining what I wanted these actors to do was a great deal more difficult than I anticipated. In truth, I knew absolutely

nothing about directing actors. After the hit and miss of the first few days of shooting, the actors became tolerant of what must have seemed to them my inability to communicate, and they began to create their own motivations for what I asked them to do physically.

I called the film *Dangerous Houses* and even scored it myself with music I played “automatically” on an electric organ. But once the work was completed and the film edited, I felt that it simply didn’t work. It had been something that I had put together intellectually, rather than intuitively, and this, for me, has always been a recipe for artistic disaster. All of my best work springs directly from my unconscious, almost complete in its original conception, like a waking dream. Otherwise, what I do is forced and artificial and the mechanism of its creation shows. I never released it, and it is not a part of my official filmography. I guess its only value is the glimpses it provides of the ruined houses of St. John’s Wood, by now long restored to their original beauty.

My time in London was full of delightful chance encounters. James Broughton, whom I had seen in Venice, arrived and began to make another of his whimsical cinematic creations, using for its setting the remnants of the Crystal Palace. I visited the shoot several times, where he had assembled a cast of professional actors from the British equivalent of off-Broadway theater. The film, called *The Pleasure Garden*, held little interest for me, though. Jimmy’s surrealist humor was not on my wavelength, but as a friend he was a total delight.

On another occasion, I was taken to watch Sandy Mackendrick at work on a film at the famous Ealing Studios. After the day’s shoot, Sandy and his crew repaired to the local pub for a pint, and I went along. I got my first taste of Guinness and half lager, and for a while after that, it was what I always ordered in a pub. Sandy had a kind, gentle personality, and I liked him immensely. Later, at Le Petit Club Francais, I got to know him and his wife, Hilary, better.

I even ran into my old friend Christopher Isherwood one night when I was dining in a restaurant in Soho. I had not seen him since our disastrous dinner with James Whale. He walked in the door with a friend and, after he was seated, came over to my table and told me that the gentleman he was with was

Gerald Hamilton, the original inspiration for the character of Mr. Norris in *The Berlin Stories*.

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I had spent the whole summer in London and began to feel Paris beckoning. Always limited to a minuscule survival budget, I looked for a cheap hotel and found one again in Saint-Germain-des-Prés on the rue des Canettes. In the Hotel des Canettes I had another room without running water and with a loo at the end of the hall. But the hotel offered a surprising and unexpected dividend: its concierge was no less than Celeste, formerly Marcel Proust's maid. She ran the hotel with her husband who was perpetually drunk but who nevertheless had the distinction of having been Proust's chauffeur.

It is a pity that my French was still very limited, because Celeste, who by then was a toothless old lady, loved to reminisce about her years with Proust. "Ah, mais vous savez, Monsieur Proust" she would begin, then tell another tale of the great writer's habits and peccadilloes. She told me how he liked to go to the park to watch beautiful young men as they strolled by. She herself was very concerned about the loss of French manners, *la politesse Française*.

My stay in Europe was drawing to a close. I did not want it to be, and I had thought long and hard about staying on and becoming a true expatriate, but my American roots called to me. I was aware that the cultural leap I would have to make to remain on was too great. There were times when I felt as American as apple pie.

I took full advantage of my last weeks in Paris and managed to have another showing of my films, this time presented under the auspices of UNESCO. Georges Dorfman, one of those in charge of the cultural branch of the United Nations organization, arranged the screenings and invited two people to whom I had longed to show my films: the French-American novelist Julien Green and the surrealist painter Leonor Fini. They both liked my films, particularly *On the Edge*, and I received invitations to meet from each of them.

Julien Green's flat, in an eighteenth century *hôtel particulier* on the Left Bank, was filled with paintings by some of my

favorite artists. There were two Dalís from his early and best period, a Eugene Berman, a Tchelitchev acrobat, and several drawings and paintings by Christian Bérard. Born at the turn of the century, Green was exactly fifty when I met him. He had dark straight hair and, though not handsome, had pleasant, strong features and a gentle, kindly manner. The rapport I had found with Green's writings was further enhanced by my discovery that based on this particular group of paintings, we shared a taste in art.

I knew that Green was gay, so I was not surprised when he brought out a photograph of an especially handsome young man and showed it to me. I was duly impressed. Then he explained that the young man was slightly retarded, and that, for a spoonful of jam, which the young man dearly loved, would offer the favors of his body. I did not know what to make of this. By this time, I had read some of Green's diaries, which were only available in French, and found myself impatient with the more recent entries which recounted his theological discussions with Jesuit priests. In one of his diaries, he explained his working method: he simply began to write without any idea of where the story might take him. But now it seemed to me that his involvement with the Catholic religion threatened to engulf him. What I had so loved about his novels was that they were pure works of the imagination.

Julien Green had rather been what I expected. Leonor Fini, on the other hand, was something else entirely — exotic, mysterious, sly, and intense. She made me think of a particular William Steig cartoon from *The Lonely Ones*, in which a woman, half hidden by a screen, peers out menacingly from behind it. The caption: "But I can mystify and terrify." The door to Fini's apartment was answered by a slim young man. He guided me through a small entrance hall where three enormous angora cats crouched together on a table and stared at me. Leonor, in an elaborate black velvet dressing gown, rose to greet me from a mauve sofa. She gazed at me in the same intense way as her cats. I asked her what films she admired and she replied by naming two of my favorites, Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr* and Robert Bresson's *Le journal d'un curé de campagne* (*Diary of a Country Priest*).

She brought out an enormous album of photos taken of her

and her friends at her summer residence in Italy where they lived in an abandoned tower that belonged to no one. The photos showed them dressed in a series of fantastic costumes and wigs. They *lived* the surreal life of the imagination in their crumbling tower by the sea. How I longed to go there and make a film out of such elements. Leonor invited me to come and do just that in another year.

Before I left, Leonor invited me to a very special party in honor of fellow surrealist painter, and her longtime lover, Stanislaw Lepri. She said, "We will eat exotic food, drink uncommon wines, and everyone will wear extraordinary costumes. We feel you like the same things we do, strange and fantastic things, and we would like you to be there." She told me that if she had met me that summer in Grasse, she would have invited me to be one of a group of beautiful young men who were in her entourage, her "Dark Angels," at the legendary masked ball given by the flamboyant interior designer Carlos de Beistegui. This missed opportunity was one I deeply regretted. Alas, I was already booked to return to America and could not go.

There was one more extraordinary meeting in store for me in Paris before I left. The film critic André Bazin had acted as the go-between for me in arranging an introduction to Robert Bresson. This austere and Catholic filmmaker lived in an Île Saint-Louis apartment on the Quai de Bourbon. My pretext for visiting him was that I wanted to write an article about his work for *Theatre Arts*. He received me cordially and plunged immediately into a discussion about the creative problems of filmmaking.

Bresson was a graying, handsome man of great personal charm. He told me he was preparing a book on film theory, which would become *Notes sur le cinématographe*. He felt the writing of this book would allow him to explore more fully his own feelings on the subject. It came as a surprise to me when he informed me that Cocteau wrote only a small part of the dialogue in *Les dames du Bois de Boulogne*. Most of it was his own, which he preferred. He seldom went to the cinema, finding the films too carelessly and imprecisely made to interest him. He also spoke of his decision not to use actors anymore, since it was his feeling that the camera unavoidably



captures the slightest falseness in the actor's pose. He felt the medium for actors should be limited to the theater. He planned henceforth to cast non-actors to type, to have his characters played by people whose souls, revealing themselves in their faces and movement, would be visible on the screen. I came away feeling that I had met a filmmaker who was a saint.

On the eve of my departure, I had dinner with Enrico Fulchignoni, another filmmaker I had met at the Venice festival. I told him of my hopes and ambitions to make more films, to find a place in the American cinema. I must have seemed very vague and idealistic to him. He became suddenly fierce. "La vie est un jungle!" he shouted, "Méfiez-vous!" ("Life is a jungle! Beware!") Of course, at the moment I was quite incapable of realizing the bitter truth of his admonition. I didn't know it then, but I was on my way back to Hollywood.

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After my Atlantic crossing on a Dutch boat, there was a stopover in New York. Anaïs Nin very kindly offered me the use of her New York apartment, a five-floor walk-up on West 13th Street. My first order of business was to cut the two films I had shot in Europe, *Dangerous Houses* and *The Assassination*, which I had shot while in Venice. But a recent letter from my parents made it clear that my duty now that I had finally returned to America was to find work.

My job-hunting efforts had little success. My social life, however, flourished. I got to know the lyricist John La Touche, who often invited me to evenings at his apartment. "Touche," as he was known, was a very short, stocky man whom emanated kindness and sympathy. I liked him enormously. He was a close friend of Alice Astor, of *the Astors*, whom I only later learned considered herself to be the reincarnation of an ancient Egyptian princess and, when put into a trance, spoke ancient Egyptian fluently. I have always been impressed and touched by true kindness. I think it is a rather rare quality, but one that La Touche possessed. One night I ran into him and Alice at a cocktail party, and as we were parting company in the street, Touche pressed a few bills in my hand and whispered, "For god's sake, take a taxi."

I met Paul and Jane Bowles at Touche's apartment one night after they had been to the circus. Paul had a Moroccan boyfriend with him whom I mistook, in his djellaba, for a performer from the circus. Jane Bowles limped when she walked and had a Band-Aid across one knee. She explained that she had injured herself just the other day. Later I learned that her limp was a permanent defect and that she always pretended that it was a recent and temporary condition.

I continued to see Anaïs and Hugo, and one night we went together to the ballet with Gore Vidal. Afterward, Gore took us to a gay bar where we met the entertainer Dwight Fiske and a member of the Rothschild family from the South. This hideously decorated space filled with handsome young men seemed to entrance Gore, but I sensed that Anaïs and Hugo were uncomfortable. When Gore's date of the evening, a good-looking young French Canadian, arrived, we left. On the taxi ride home, Anaïs complained that Gore had no interest in life other than to write bestsellers and date handsome young men, and even then his basic attitude remained one of endless boredom. But I continued to like Gore for his intelligence and wit, no matter how acerbic his views of life might be.

My other contacts in New York revolved around the poet Oscar Williams and his wife, Gene Derwood. I had a particular rapport with Derwood, and one day she asked me to sit for my portrait. Dylan Thomas had recently died, and while she painted she told me of the "silver of the malignant moon" that appeared in the sky while she painted on the night of his demise. Oscar and Gene lived at the lower end of Manhattan in the financial district in a flat that was painted a vivid blue, the one color that for me would be totally unbearable. I found it hard to believe that it didn't seem to bother me.

Louis and Bebe Barron were pioneers in the field of electronic music, and their chief claim to fame was that they had scored the science fiction movie *Forbidden Planet*. They shared my interest in film, and we became friends. They were, in turn, among Marlon Brando's friends, and one night I met him at their apartment. He had an Iranian girlfriend at the time (Marlon only dated dark-haired, dark-skinned girls) and announced that he was leaving shortly for his first trip to Europe. I asked him what he planned to do there. "Oh," he

replied, “just fuck around.” Another day, I encountered Marlon at a lunch counter and sat next to him as he flirted outrageously with the waitress. Marlon was a very sexy guy, and he used his fame and looks to play capriciously with people who were attracted to him.

An old friend from Los Angeles, Bobby Ossorio, now lived in New York and we renewed our friendship. Bobby was one of the kindest, sweetest, and most generous people I had ever known or indeed, was ever to know in the future. He was a ballet dancer who never went beyond the corps de ballet but later established his own ballet school in Manhattan where he helped impoverished dance students. Bobby lived in a beautiful Greenwich Village town house with a staff that consisted of a majordomo, a cook, and a maid. Occasionally, I would stay in one of the guest rooms.

Bobby’s older brother, Alfonso, had a huge house in East Hampton where we often went on weekends. His house was filled with the latest work of Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, and Jean Dubuffet. Alfonso was an abstract painter whose canvases were partly three-dimensional and scattered with small objects like glass eyeballs and pieces of painted wood. Because of the Ossorio family’s wealth, he was considered to be more of a collector than a painter, no doubt to his chagrin.

It is apparent from these remembered events that my job hunt was quickly going nowhere. New York was the home of documentaries, commercials, and live television. I was not interested in any of these. I was having a good time but standing still in New York. I had no choice: I had to return to Los Angeles.

## Los Angeles Again

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Europe and New York had been glorious experiences of expansion and discovery for me. But now I was forced to face *reality*, that bugaboo so dear to the hearts of the bourgeoisie. The tiny allowance from my parents that had enabled me to live with total freedom was about to be withdrawn. I was face to face with the necessity of “earning a living.”

First, I needed a place to live. I quickly found one — sufficiently cheap in rent but barely tolerable as an environment. It was half of a tacky clapboard house off Vine Street, around the block from my friend Samson De Brier. Samson was an exotic and colorful man who led the life of a quintessential dilettante. He was the perfect older friend for a young man with artistic ambitions, always understanding and full of wise advice. After he graduated from school in the 1920s, he, too, had gone to Paris where he spent time with Gertrude Stein and André Gide. He was an avid reader with a wonderful collection of fascinating books but totally without artistic ambitions. He was instead a connoisseur, a critic, a *bon vivant*.

It was at Samson’s exotic home that we filmed Kenneth Anger’s film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*. Samson had spent years collecting old Hollywood ephemera, set pieces, and costumes, so his home was the perfect place to realize Kenneth’s rich, luminous vision. Kenneth and I and our friends — Renate Druks, Paul Mathison, Anaïs Nin, and Cameron Parsons — all appeared in elaborate costumes as alternate aspects of our personalities. For me, it was a dream come true to play Cesare the somnambulist from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Cameron, a painter and occultist, played the sorceress and was extraordinary in a mantilla and Spanish shawl. Anaïs was her counterpoint in a blue cocoon and golden mesh.

Samson, who played the host to these personages, appeared in many guises, all of them magical. It was a vibrant gallery of portraits, each transformed by the film itself.

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I stayed in my dumpy apartment near Samson's for only a short while. I remember it chiefly as the place I entertained my friend Stanley Kubrick. I had met Kubrick at the disastrous screening of his first film *Fear and Desire* when I was in New York. The film was so badly received that Stanley had burst into tears. I could never forget this touching vulnerability. While I had been in Europe, he had made another film, *Killer's Kiss*, that was now considered his official "first" movie. With this accomplishment under his belt, he had arrived in Hollywood to make another, more important film. He was accompanied by his young ballerina wife Ruth Sobotka, and I seemed to be just about his only acquaintance in Los Angeles. Sharing our passion for film, and seeing that he was rather at loose ends, I invited him and his wife for dinner quite often. She was an attractive, sweet girl, and they seemed very much in love. It was not long, however, before Stanley met James Harris, a young man with family "connections" in the film business. They became partners and set about to make *The Killing*. The rest, as they say, is history. Stanley and I, though always remaining friends, drifted apart.

Shortly after my return to Los Angeles, Iris Tree invited me to a party at her new place. As befit her eccentric personality, she had moved to an octagon-shaped apartment above the merry-go-round on the Santa Monica Pier. I brought along a writer friend, Robert Phippeny, who I thought would enjoy meeting Iris. He was a handsome young intellectual and very full of himself. He liked nothing better than to charm and fascinate a young admirer. He found the perfect listener at the party in Don Bachardy, Christopher Isherwood's new boyfriend. They sat together on a couch, with Don seemingly enraptured by Robert's megalomaniacal conversation. Since they remained in view of everyone the whole time, there was no question of any indiscretion occurring between them. When it came time to leave, I paid my respects to the hostess and then stopped to say

goodnight to Christopher. Without warning, he stood up and punched me in the face. There were gasps from the other guests, and the party chatter abruptly ceased. In the silence, I stood there for a moment rubbing my assaulted eye. There was nothing to be said, nothing to be done. I walked out of the room followed by my friend.

The next day there were phone calls and postmortems. Christopher had been in a drunken rage over the attentions my friend had paid to Don. Since he couldn't bring himself to attack a total stranger, he had targeted me as the scapegoat for his fury. I realized I had the right to sue him for assault and battery, but was advised against it by several of Christopher's friends. "Young men trying to make careers don't offend important people," one told me. I ended up with a small out-of-court settlement and was forever ousted from the charmed Isherwood circle.

It was around this time a friend introduced me to Edward James, an extremely eccentric British millionaire who had once been married to the dancer Tilly Losch. He was a small, nervous little man who spoke rapidly, wrote poetry, and had for years been collecting surrealist art. He liked good-looking young men and was in the habit of hiring them to be his "secretary." I was given to understand by those who knew him that, despite his eccentricities, this job did not in any way entail untoward sexual advances. When he proposed that I work for him, I agreed, since I still had found no gainful employment.

Working for Edward consisted mainly of accompanying him on his daily errands and typing out his poems, which, to me, were excessively long and boring. Edward owned more than one house in Los Angeles but didn't live in any of them. He preferred to stay in hotels, usually the exclusive and expensive Bel Air. One day he took me out to Malibu to a house he had by the beach. We stopped by first thing in the morning, and he pointed out a group of pots with plants in them that he had bought at a nearby nursery. He explained that his gardener would plant them later in the day. In the meantime, he installed me at a nearby motel where I spent most of the day copying poems on a portable typewriter while he went back into town to have lunch with his dear friends the Stravinskys.

Late in the afternoon he returned to pick me up, and we stopped by the Malibu house once again.

The plants had been planted but in quite a careless way that left branches and leaves strewn all over the garden. To my astonishment, he picked up a handful of branches and began to cry. "Look at what he's done!" he sobbed. "Look at what he did to my beautiful plants!" Tears streamed down his face. "Oh, my poor, beautiful plants," he wailed. "How could he do such a thing?" I was speechless. His behavior was more that of someone who had come home to find that his children had been murdered. Of course, it figured. He was a person cosseted by wealth all his life, and one felt very little human sympathy from him. He could give his emotions to plants but not living beings. I did find him a fascinating study in borderline madness, and I continued to offer my friendship.

Another of his homes was on Milner Road in the Hollywood Hills. It was a lovely Spanish-style house from the 1920s, and he allowed a Philippine waiter who worked at the Polynesian-style restaurant Don the Beachcomber to act as caretaker and live in the maid's room off the kitchen. Quite unexpectedly, Edward asked me if I would like to live in this house. I was thrilled and told him I would be glad to pay the utilities while staying there. He seemed very pleased and surprised at that, and I moved in. The house was two stories built on a hillside. The bedrooms were upstairs, and the living rooms, dining room, and kitchen below. Egress to the lower level was through a trapdoor in the entrance hall floor. Edward loved to tell how when the tax collector visited, he would close the trapdoor, put a rug over it, and claim that the entire house was one floor. This was typical of his impish sense of humor.

This house was filled with many paintings from Edward's collection. The walls were festooned with Dalís, Bermans, and Tchelitchews. I gave cocktail parties there when I could afford them, which greatly impressed my friends. At one of these parties, Lilly Fenichel, the niece of the famous Viennese psychiatrist Otto Fenichel, looked at my surroundings cynically and leered at me. "No matter what you do, Curtis," she said, "you always come up smelling of roses." I did not bother to tell her that I had not prostituted myself one little bit to live in this splendor.

There were two bedrooms on the upper floor, and one of them was permanently locked. The legend was that it had been the nuptial bedroom of Edward and Tilly Losch, and that Edward had locked it forever after the failure of their marriage. But one day, to my surprise, he stopped by with a key, saying that he had some things in the room that he needed to sort out and opened it. Famously phobic about germs, Edward was in the habit of wrapping things in tissue paper so that germs could not pass from one object to another. The chests of drawers in the room were filled with tiny tissue-wrapped things, like Fabergé eggs and ancient Egyptian artifacts. In the end, the room seemed to possess no other secrets, but when we left, Edward carefully locked the door once again.

I decided to make another film during my stay at this house. I had become acquainted with Cameron Parsons through Kenneth. She was a mysterious and rather sinister woman who painted magical pictures and was reputed to be a sorceress. I found her fascinating. I loved her paintings, and indeed, was more interested in them than her reputed magical powers. The occult side of her activities came from a period in her life when she had been married to Jack Parsons, an ardent disciple of Aleister Crowley. She still bore the banner of Crowleyian “magick,” and I incorporated symbolic aspects of her discipleship in the film. Even the title, *The Wormwood Star*, is Crowleyian in its inspiration. But the film is really about Cameron’s work as a painter, and the thrust of the film is to present the artist as an alchemist who, through her creative work, becomes herself transmuted into gold.

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I now had a secure and wonderful base of operations, but the need for me to find “gainful employment” remained. I felt I must get a job in the film business. Anything else would have simply delayed my ever-present goal. I finally hit upon a definite plan to remedy this. I decided to call Albert Lewin. Lewin had long been a producer at MGM, working closely with Irving Thalberg. His producing credits included *Red-Headed Woman* and *Mutiny on the Bounty*, but more recently he had started directing. His first film in this capacity had caused quite



a stir — an adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It was quite unique next to the usual run of MGM product and exquisitely made. Much publicity was given its new star, Hurd Hatfield, but an almost equal amount was given to the fact that Lewin had brought Ivan Albright to Hollywood from Chicago to paint the portrait of Gray in his final stages of disintegration. Albright, whose work can be seen mainly at the Art Institute of Chicago, painted every subject as if it were slowly rotting from inside, like overripe fruit. He was the perfect artist for the job, and who but Al Lewin would have had the knowledge and wisdom to engage him?

Knowing of this interest in contemporary and avant-garde art, I was sure that Lewin, unlike other Hollywood moguls, might be able to see how my talents could be adapted to commercial Hollywood ends. Making proper contact with him seemed the only problem, but I solved that with an audacious lie. When I had been living in Paris and so often spending my time at the Cinematheque, Mary Meerson had mentioned that the only interesting film to arrive in Paris from America since the end of the war was Lewin's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Lewin had chosen the Cinematheque for the first showing of his film, and Mary had often referred to its director intimately as "dear Al."

I telephoned Lewin at MGM and told his secretary that Mary Meerson had asked me to call him. In a moment he was on the phone. "How is Mary?" he asked with booming enthusiasm. I explained that she was fine and that she had suggested that I ought to meet him. "Well, come right over!" he exclaimed.

Within the hour, I found myself ushered into his spacious office in the Irving Thalberg Building at MGM. He came around from his desk and greeted me warmly — a thin, gray-haired man who wore a visible hearing aid. The name of Mary Meerson was certainly the right one to have mentioned, because he was so extremely affable that I felt at ease broaching the subject of my visit. I wanted him to see my films. "Of course," he said. "I'll set up a screening." He arranged a date with his secretary, and the first lap of my mission was accomplished.

The next time we met was in one of the basement projection rooms at the studio. He sat through the films and seemed

impressed with them. We went back to his office, and he asked me what he could do for me. I told him I wanted a job in the film business — anything just to get started. He told me he had nothing to offer me but that he had a nephew who was an agent, and he would recommend me to him. Perhaps he might find me something. This was sufficiently vague to leave me somewhat disheartened. I had been so buoyed by Lewin's warmth and enthusiasm and my knowledge that our tastes and interests were so similar. But at least now I had gotten my foot in a studio door.

About a month had passed when at last I received a phone call from Lewin's nephew, Bob Goldfarb. He just might have something for me and had scheduled an appointment for me to meet the producer Jerry Wald at Columbia Studios. Wald needed an assistant. At that moment, it seemed to me that the whole trajectory of my future was suddenly at stake. I had never been more nervous about any event in my life. Before the appointment, I actually sought the help of a hypnotist. The objective was to fill my mind with positive suggestions that might subtly convey themselves to my intended employer. Laugh if you will, but it worked. I got the job. The next time I walked into Columbia Studios, my name was on a door.

Jerry Wald had a reputation as being the inspiration for Budd Schulberg's novel about a ruthlessly ambitious Hollywood producer, *What Makes Sammy Run?* I never read the book, so I don't know how closely it mirrored the real man, but I did hear the stories of how Jerry started as a newspaper journalist in New York and came to Hollywood to establish a career in the movies. To this end, he secretly hired a couple of experienced writers who needed jobs (this was in depths of the depression) to write scripts on which he was credited. Of course he fed them ideas, but they did the dog's work of getting things down on paper. Whether it was true or not, in light of these stories it was not a surprise to learn that Jerry Wald had not hired me because of my films, although they were what brought me to him. Someone had shown him some of my articles in *Theatre Arts* and Jerry, the idea man, needed someone to articulate his ideas onto paper. I found that my job was to read and give my opinion on various scripts and novels, and also to serve as his voice when he was asked to contribute an article to *Variety* or

*The Hollywood Reporter* on the state of the industry or some other such topic. I had my own office with my name on the door in gold letters. It was very tiny, situated within the inner labyrinth of the studio so that it had no windows, but I continued to be thrilled to have it.

When I arrived at Columbia, it was 1955 and Jerry had both *The Eddy Duchin Story* and *The Harder They Fall* in production. Little did we know that his tenure at Columbia was nearing its end. He had not been getting along well with the president of the studio, Harry Cohn, and would often return from their meetings shaking and dripping with perspiration. My ignorance was bliss, so I proceeded to take full advantage of all the perks of my position. One that I particularly enjoyed was being able to accompany Jerry to dailies. Each day I watched the bits and pieces of the films Jerry was working on — scenes between Tyrone Power and Kim Novak, Humphrey Bogart and Jan Sterling. On occasion, we would watch dailies from other pictures, and one day I got to watch Joan Crawford in a scene from *Autumn Leaves*. It was a revelation.

For the first time, I became aware of what the term “movie star” means. The word “star” in the context of a top movie personality is very appropriate, since astronomically speaking, a star is a body that is illuminated from within. This illumination from within is what I witnessed that day in a projection room at Columbia Studios. The shoot had taken place during the summer. The camera was set on a close-up of Joan Crawford between takes, looking very wilted and ordinary, fanning herself in the heat. Then the clapboard was thrust in front of her, the clapper lowered, and a voice said, “Scene eighty-four, take three.” In that split second, I witnessed an ordinary, exhausted woman center all of her energies and come vibrantly alive as Joan Crawford, the Movie Star. It was a metaphysical experience. All at once, I understood the indefinable difference between a star and an actor.

Jerry, who was the very definition of a workaholic, had a staff of three secretaries who were kept busy every minute. He usually arrived at the office at six a.m. and dictated memos until nine a.m., all of which were waiting to be transcribed at the time of his secretaries’ arrival. One of his secretaries was a secret alcoholic who kept bottles of gin stashed around the

office. When the final days arrived and Jerry's departure was imminent, she got very drunk one afternoon and threatened to go upstairs and give Harry Cohn a piece of her mind.

To prevent this from happening, I was delegated to keep her calm until the doctor Jerry had sent for arrived to take care of her. I found myself all alone with a woman who was rapidly losing control. At all costs, I had to keep her from going to Harry Cohn's office. I hit upon the idea of moving the hands of the office clock so that she would think it was too late in the day to find Cohn in. This worked at first, but she began to suspect the ruse when she noticed that the light from the windows seemed a little too bright for the time on the clock face. I told her she was mistaken, that the late sun was just unusually bright and it was indeed time for her to go home. I was really at wit's end when the men in white coats finally came to take her away.

Jerry went to the Fox Studios next and took me with him. Unlike the Columbia lot, which was small and very limited in space, the Fox lot in West Los Angeles was hugely spacious and grand. We were installed in a couple of adjoining bungalows that were reputed to have been where Shirley Temple and her staff were once headquartered. My own office was almost as large as Jerry's, and I lost no time in inviting friends to visit me so that they could be properly impressed by my new station in life. But it was all facade, since I had no power and was still paid my miserable beginner's salary. Jerry wasn't generous with a buck.

Still, it was great fun being on the Fox lot where I could have lunch every day in the executive dining room in the commissary. The walls of the commissary were decorated with painted portraits of Fox stars from the past, like Sonja Henie, Betty Grable, Alice Faye and, of course, Shirley Temple — Darryl Zanuck's pride and joy. The food was good and consisted of dishes named after the stars. My favorite was the "Anne Baxter salad," a concoction of shredded chicken and cabbages with a wonderful dressing, the recipe for which is probably lost in the dust of time, alas.

We had arrived at the studio before the major portion of its acreage was sold to create Century City. I loved to visit the back-lot where the French village set for *Song of Bernadette* was

still standing, as well as the Cambodian-style artifacts left over from *The King and I*, and the usual New York streets and waterfront docks. To preserve the memory, I brought a photographer friend to the lot and had my portrait taken in the decaying complex of wood and plaster that propped up the sets from behind.

One day I arrived to discover Cary Grant sitting in Jerry's office. He was appearing in Jerry's production of *An Affair to Remember*, a remake of *Love Affair*, both of them directed by Leo McCarey. I had learned by now to act nonchalant during any encounters with movie stars, however wide-eyed and impressed I might have really felt. Jerry introduced me to Mr. Grant, and he said, "Haven't we met somewhere before?" I knew we hadn't, because I would have surely remembered. So I thought a moment and replied, "No, I don't think so, but you do look awfully familiar." He did laugh.

The next time I saw Cary Grant was on the lot. Another of my perks at Fox was that I could occasionally order some older film that I wanted to see and show it in a Fox projection room. I was still eager to see some of Sternberg's films again, even if I had seen them before, and one day decided to run *Blonde Venus*. I ran into Cary on a break from shooting and invited him to the screening. It was, after all, his first film. He thanked me and said that he wasn't sure he'd like to see it, but certainly his wife Betsy Drake might want to. Could she come? Indeed she could. On the day of the screening just before the film began, Cary and Betsy entered the projection room together. I told the projectionist to start the film. At the point where Cary makes his first appearance in the picture as a gangster smitten with Dietrich, he began to groan. Quietly at first, then more loudly. "Oh, no!" he finally cried and ran out of the room. Betsy stayed and quite enjoyed the film.

Besides being Jerry's ghostwriter, my main function was to work with the writers he hired as a kind of go-between. Jerry would send letters, composed by me, to various important novelists asking them if they thought any of their books would make a good film. He received a number of interesting replies, though few were actually pursued. Jerry had a great respect for distinguished writers. This is what led to his productions of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and *The Hamlet*

(which finally emerged with a title change to *The Long, Hot Summer*). Among other prestigious books Jerry decided to adapt to the screen was Romain Rolland's *Jean-Christophe*, and he chose Christopher Isherwood to do the screenplay.

So there I was, thrown into intimate contact with my old nemesis. I feared it would create an uneasy situation for the both of us, but this aura of dread was soon dispelled when Christopher and I encountered each other in a hallway and exchanged innocuous greetings. I did not know until years later how Christopher regarded this encounter, but when his diaries were posthumously published, I was amazed to learn that he had been very apprehensive about my presence. He thought I might malevolently sabotage him in some way. Since that is not in my nature, such a thing never crossed my mind. I think he was projecting his own malevolence on me. In any event, the Romain Rolland project never went beyond the preliminary treatment stage, and Christopher was soon out of my life again.

One of Jerry's favorite directors was Jean Negulesco, a Romanian who had enjoyed a successful career in Hollywood with such pictures as *The Mask of Dimitrios* and *Johnny Belinda*. Now Jerry had hired him to direct *The Best of Everything*, which I believe was the first example of a novel being written in advance of a movie expressly to serve as the basis for one. Jerry came up with the characters and the story, then set about to find a writer who would develop these ideas into a novel, which would eventually become a movie. Jerry engaged Rona Jaffe, a girl from New York who was working at Fawcett, to write the novel. It was duly published and, like clockwork, became a best seller.

The film, about the ambitions and loves of three young girls from the secretarial pool at a large publishing house, offered star-making opportunities to three new young actresses: Hope Lange, Diane Baker, and Suzy Parker. Suzy was a celebrated fashion model whom Jerry particularly wanted for the film. He offered Joan Crawford a guest role as a senior editor in the publishing house. Having revived her sinking career with *Mildred Pierce*, Jerry had continued to be her friend. One day Joan accompanied Jerry and me to screen dailies. We were watching a scene with the faces of all three young actresses projected on the huge Cinemascope screen when Joan suddenly

exclaimed, "My god, Jerry, they've all got mustaches!" It was true: when you looked closely, you could see the fine shadow of down on the skin above their lips. The next morning the girls were in the makeup department getting wax treatments. This was now the fifties, and already many of the old studio star treatment protocols were being forgotten. It took an old pro like Ms. Crawford to spot such an omission. That none of the three young actresses in the film ever emerged as big stars says much about the precariousness of Hollywood careers. Lange and Baker continued to get creditable acting roles after the film, but Suzy Parker had a cold personality and could not act. Jerry's faith in her went unrewarded.

Jerry's biggest and most successful production during his time at Fox was *Peyton Place*. He had read the book in galleys and immediately bought the film rights. *Peyton Place* was a lurid story of small-town life in Maine written by Grace Metalious, a housewife who created a thick fictional veneer to cover over events and characters that were based on her own experiences in the town. After the book became a best seller, the townspeople were furious over its revelations of their sleazy sex and improper behavior. The development of the script turned out to be my most valuable lesson in how to write a successful screenplay. Jerry hired John Michael Hayes, known for his collaborations with Alfred Hitchcock, as the principal screenwriter. He was such a prestigious figure in Hollywood at this time that Jerry gave him carte blanche to adapt the novel exactly as he saw fit, and allowed him to produce a first draft without any consultation. After ten weeks, the typical allotted time for a first draft, a completed screenplay arrived in Jerry's office. We all read it, and though mirroring the novel closely, it was not at all the film Jerry wanted to make.

We were forced to scrap the whole thing, and this time John Michael Hayes was told, page by page, just how to write it. Jerry, Hayes, the director Mark Robson, and I sat in Jerry's office for days and hashed out each incident, each dramatic moment, each bit of character evolution as it occurred in the final film. As we did this, a new continuity emerged out of Mrs. Metalious's characters and situations, and although Hayes wrote the words, the ideas and events were Jerry's, Mark's, and

mine. I believe it was our underpinnings — the solid construction of the screenplay that we shaped — that ultimately made it work.

Mark Robson, the director, was an affable man who was chiefly meaningful to me as one of producer Val Lewton's protégés. At the beginning of his career, he had directed Boris Karloff in *Isle of the Dead*. By this time, he had established himself as an important director in Hollywood's eyes, which meant that he could deliver conventional moviemaking on schedule. One day, before the shooting had begun on *Peyton Place*, Robson told me that he had discovered a marvelous new actress named Diane Varsi and wanted my opinion of her. We went to a soundstage where she repeated for us the performance that had so impressed him. She played the scene beautifully. I could see immediately why he had been so captivated. Everything she did had a strong immediacy and sense of spontaneity, like watching life as it unfolds rather than watching an actress reading lines. She was fresh and pretty and had an appealing air of vulnerability about her. Following his instincts, Robson cast her in the key role of Alison, Lana Turner's daughter in the story. Ironically, Jerry Wald had wanted Susan Strasberg for the part of the daughter, but her father, Lee Strasberg, the famous Actor's Studio guru, had felt the part wasn't important enough for her. The result was that Diane Varsi became an overnight movie star and received an Academy Award nomination while Susan's career languished. In any event, *Peyton Place* was a huge success, and the film spawned a sequel and a popular TV series.

In moving from Columbia to Fox, Jerry had rid himself of his troublesome alcoholic secretary and hired in her place a pretty young English girl. She seemed very capable and took her place alongside the other secretaries who catered to Jerry's energetic creative activities. One day, however, when I arrived at the office and cheerily wished her a good morning, she simply glared at me in anger. I was puzzled, since I was sure I had done nothing that could have possibly offended her. I felt like the accused but innocent Josef K. in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. More as a kind of joke than anything else, I returned the next day with a copy of Kafka's book, which I gave her as a peace offering and gift. Unfortunately, this did not diffuse the



situation, and a few days later something quite horrible happened. She came into my office and told me that she was very upset because the “children in the schools had begun talking about her.” She said she could bear the fact that people laughed whenever she walked into a room, but that schoolchildren talking about her was just too much. I was dealing with a full-out paranoid schizophrenic.

I discussed the matter with Jerry and the other secretaries, but no one quite knew what to do. To have her committed to a mental institution required permission from her family, and they were far away in England. Even to get her examined by a doctor required her consent, and she would not give it. Meanwhile, I grew more terrified each day that she might arrive with a gun and shoot everybody. Once when I came into the office, she had put up a large sign that said “I am composing the ‘Funeral March Polka.’ WILL IT BE A HIT OR A MISS?” Very ominous indeed. Somehow Jerry finally obtained some papers of commitment signed by a couple of Beverly Hills psychiatrists. The men in the white coats showed up at her apartment where they found her in a state of filth and disarray and took her off to be treated at a sanatorium. Her parents were sent for and eventually took her back to England.

This little divertissement at an end, I next found myself given the added prestige of a solo screen credit as “Associate Producer” on a film that was designed to introduce to the public a popular young rock ’n’ roll singer named Fabian who was following in the footsteps of Elvis Presley. It was a bucolic romp called *Hound Dog Man*, and Don Siegel was given the job of directing it. Don had initially been hired by Jerry to direct a film about the Boxer Rebellion in China, so by the time *Hound Dog Man* came around, we had already been working together for quite some time on the development of that screenplay. The writer on the Chinese project was a charming Englishman named Barré Lyndon, whose claim to fame was authoring *The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse*, a successful Broadway play and subsequent movie starring Edward G. Robinson. Lyndon was a slow and meticulous writer, and we still didn’t have a completed screenplay when Jerry decided to put the Fabian vehicle into immediate production and cash in on his huge popularity with teenagers.

I absolutely loved Don Siegel. He was witty and bright and had a very wry view of the silliness of Hollywood. We went together to see Fabian in concert at the Palladium in Hollywood. Every move that Fabian made was greeted by screams and squeals of delight from his predominately young female audience. Don turned to me and said, "We really don't need to do anything, do we? Just put him up on the screen and forget the rest." But we didn't forget the rest, and we cobbled together a reasonably good screenplay with a reasonably good cast to surround Fabian that included Carol Lynley, Stuart Whitman, and Betty Field.

I had idolized Betty Field when I was growing up. I loved her in *Kings Row*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Victory*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Blues in the Night*. She is nothing less than electrifying in all these films, and I was tense but thrilled at the prospect of meeting her. But now she was middle-aged, playing Fabian's mother. As soon as I met her at a costume fitting, I sensed that the fire in her had died out. "You seem awfully young to be an associate producer," she commented. Later, as I watched her work some of the scenes, I knew that my first impression had been correct. She was a fine actress, but the magic that had so thrilled me was gone. Was this kind of loss an inevitable part of the aging process? Of course, I was dealing with an imponderable — a thing of "the spirit," the "fire within." It could not be measured or contained in a bottle, but whatever it was, it was gone.

One of our productions during this time was *Let's Make Love*, a musical directed by George Cukor. It starred Marilyn Monroe and Yves Montand, whose on-screen romance quickly turned into a real affair. I have never forgotten the peculiar experience of sitting in a projection room watching the dailies on this film with Marilyn and her coach, Paula Strasberg. Paula was the wife of Lee Strasberg and the mother of Susan. The Strasbergs had greedily latched on to the highly insecure and vulnerable Marilyn, and I'm sure made her feel like she couldn't survive without them.

Paula's primary job as "coach" seemed to be to bolster Marilyn's fragile ego. While watching the scenes with Marilyn, Mrs. Strasberg kept up a continuous monologue of encouragement, which she whispered into Marilyn's ear. I

heard it every day. "Oh Marilyn," she would say, "look how well you do that. You are wonderful. Yes, perfect, perfect. Look at the way you enter that room. Like a bird, like a bird! Oh, yes. Watch the way you do that. See, see, just like I told you. Oh, Marilyn, that's lovely, lovely . . ." And so the litany would go on every day until the projection was over and they left the room. Marilyn was quite good in the film, though I doubt it had anything to do with this coaching.

My next project with Jerry was a film based on a play by William Inge called *A Loss of Roses*. It was a coming-of-age story about a young man who falls in love with a sexy, slightly older, and worldly woman who is visiting his small town. Richard Beymer was cast as the boy, Claire Trevor his mother, and Joanne Woodward as the older woman. I was again to be the associate producer. I had little regard for Beymer, since I found him bland and uninteresting and not a very good actor. But I was thrilled to be able to work with the great Claire Trevor, whose role as the alcoholic gangster's moll in the Jerry Wald/John Huston production of *Key Largo* had been so memorable. I was also delighted to be working with Joanne Woodward, whom I had gotten to know socially and whose work as an actress I greatly admired.

In getting the script into condition to shoot, I had to work with the most intensely neurotic writer I had ever met, Meade Roberts. His only claim to fame was that he had written a mildly successful off-Broadway play called *A Palm Tree in a Rose Garden*. He had so many nervous tics and mannerisms that I wanted to scream after every meeting with him, but we finally managed to hammer out an acceptable screenplay.

Franklin Schaffner, our director, had received a great deal of acclaim for his work in live television, but this would be his first film. He was an intelligent, cultivated, and charming gentleman, and I enjoyed working with him. Naturally, he was eager to make a splash and worked meticulously on every aspect of the film.

Joanne and I shared a love for classic horror films, and both of us revered the particular campy humor employed by James Whale in *The Old Dark House* and *Bride of Frankenstein*. Paul Newman, Joanne's husband, did not share this taste and seemed to find our peculiar delight incomprehensible. Joanne's

sense of humor stood her in good stead when Jerry decided that her breasts were too small for the sexy role she was playing. But just stuffing a bra was not the answer. They wanted her to appear to have free-swinging and untrammelled breasts with the outline of the nipple showing through her blouse. It was decided that the way to do this was to take a cast of her own breasts as the base on which false breasts could be modeled to fit, and then glued on. In this way they would look perfectly natural and no one would be the wiser. Joanne submitted to this rather embarrassing procedure with grace and played the role with the false breasts firmly in place.

During production Jerry had complained from time to time of back pain and went into the hospital for tests. He returned, continued to work, and then went into the hospital again. Near the end of shooting, he went into the hospital yet again and suddenly and unexpectedly died of a heart attack. Jerry Wald was a relatively young man, only in his fifties, so the news of his death came as a terrible shock.

As the associate producer, I had to supervise the completion of the film. When Jerry had arrived at Fox from Columbia, the studio had been under the aegis of Spyros Skouras, but at the time of Jerry's death, Darryl Zanuck had returned to take over the reins of power. This change would make finishing the film very difficult.

Franklin Schaffner completed his cut, which included several musical sequences that gave the film a slightly fanciful air. Schaffner was very proud of these, but when he showed his version to Zanuck, Zanuck hated it. Zanuck promptly took the film out of Schaffner's hands and recut it, first removing in their totality all the musical sequences. To add further insult, he cut a climactic scene from Schaffner's version in which Joanne's character, pushed to a point of total despair, attempts suicide by slashing her wrists with pieces of broken glass. It was a disturbing, brilliantly acted scene, absolutely the dramatic high point of the film. Without it, the attitude of the characters at the end of the film made no sense. Richard Zanuck (in later years a major Hollywood producer) served as his father Darryl's go-between with me. He delivered his father's orders and I executed them. In the case of this scene, the order was, "Cut it out. My father says it's too depressing."

Out it went. I felt terribly sorry for Franklin Schaffner as he watched his work being butchered. The film suffered one final ignominy when Zanuck retitled it *The Stripper*. *The Stripper* passed by the critics without a murmur, and today it is largely forgotten.

It may be gathered now that Jerry Wald was an extremely dynamic producer. He probably would have made an excellent studio head but being an executive didn't interest him. It was the hands-on experience of making films that excited him. It was a great loss when he died. His early death seemed to me to be connected to the unrelenting intensity of his involvement with work. I felt especially sorry for his wife, Connie, easily one of the most charming women in Hollywood. Naturally, I was expected to attend the funeral and was picked up by a limousine driver to go to Forest Lawn with some of the other guests. It was my first experience of a big Hollywood funeral with everyone in black suits, all the ladies in elaborate black hats, and the flashbulbs of the press photographers constantly blinding our eyes. I was greatly saddened to lose my mentor and grateful for all he had taught me.

## *Night Tide*

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Throughout all my years with Jerry Wald, I never let go of my secret plan to launch myself as a director. In my spare time, I wrote a screenplay based on an unpublished short story I had written while in France. Looking through the poems of Edgar Allan Poe, I found the perfect title, “Night Tide,” from “Annabel Lee.” It was the story of a young American sailor’s encounter with a sideshow mermaid, who might or might not be the real thing.

By now I had moved from the art-filled opulence of Edward James’s house to a pleasant apartment on Hollywood Boulevard. My landlady, Dale Sherwood, was a professional astrologer and student of all manner of esoterica. Luck was very much with me when I had rented this apartment. Dale was a real fount of wisdom and good advice at this point in my life. When she was young, she had worked as a stuntwoman in Republic westerns. She was small and light and could take a fall easily, without harming herself.

Of course, I could not begin production on *Night Tide* until the financing was in place. My first tentative efforts in fundraising turned out to be rather odd. Dale introduced me to a young welterweight boxer from Brooklyn who told me he knew “some guys” who might be willing to finance my film. He said he would arrange for me to meet them, and soon I was invited to lunch at the Hollywood Brown Derby. I arrived and was introduced to four or five *Italianate* gentlemen, impeccably groomed and all in dark suits. In low, polite, modulated voices they discussed my project. Indeed, they might well be interested. It took me a few moments before I realized who they were, and then my interest in what they might offer me was replaced with an eager desire to end the meeting and leave. They were members of the notorious Mickey Cohen gang

— Mafia, pure and simple. I had visions of myself ending up at the bottom of the Los Angeles River in a block of cement if my film didn't make money. I smiled, I dissimulated, I looked at my watch. In what seemed to me to be the cleverest and smoothest way possible, I managed to leave with assurances that we would be "in touch." Thank god I never heard from them again.

My next foray into the jungle of private financing was truly bizarre. For years I had heard that the Kosloff Dance Studios was involved in the financing of low-budget films. The studio had been founded by the dancer Theodore Kosloff, who had appeared in a number of silent films. His son, Maurice, now ran the business, and I remembered reading some bad publicity about him involving an incident with one of his underage ballerina pupils. Whatever had happened, it was all in the past now and my only interest in Kosloff was the possibility of his financing *Night Tide*. I had an appointment to see him at night, because he taught classes during the day. As I walked through the dance studio, my footsteps echoed on the wooden floor, and I gave a passing glance at my reflection in the huge rehearsal mirrors. I found the stairs to his office in the back and went up.

A small man was sitting in the waiting room reading a magazine. I sat down and looked at the walls, which were filled with lobby cards from B, or more accurately, C movies made on the cheap at companies like Monogram and PRC. I had not heard of any of them. Apparently, these were some of the films Maurice Kosloff had helped finance. Kosloff appeared and ushered me into his office, which contained a large desk, more posters of obscure movies, and a few nice pictures of pubescent ballerinas in tutu. Kosloff was a tall, thin man with black brillantine hair and a pencil-thin mustache. The jacket of his suit had the wide padded shoulders of the forties. He looked like the kind of man you wouldn't trust to sell you a used car.

I had given him my script in advance and he had read it. He then called in the little man whom I had seen in the waiting room. "Joe," he said, "I want you to meet Mr. Harrington. I want you to tell him what you think of his script." Kosloff spoke his words to Joe very slowly and with great emphasis, as if trying to make himself understood by someone slightly deaf

or retarded. Joe replied with a heavy Brooklyn accent. "Uh . . . I , uh — like it. Yeah. I think it could make a lot of money. Yeah. I do."

"Thank you, Joe," Kosloff said in the same slow and patient way he had spoken before. Joe went back to the waiting room and Kosloff leaned toward me over his desk, his speech normal again, but quietly confidential, "Joe's out here from New York and I'm trying to help him. I said he could be my story editor. I'm trying to fix him up with somebody, a boy or a girl, it doesn't really matter, you know what I mean?" I nodded, which seemed better than trying to say something. Then he became even more confidential, as if he was about to impart to me the Secret of Secrets. "You see," he nodded his head toward a door at the back of the office, "I've got a real live hermaphrodite back there." This time, I really didn't know what to say. I left shortly and never heard from him again.

I next offered the script to Roger Corman. He liked it but felt the project was not commercial enough for his taste. Despite that, he decided to help me raise the money to make it. He offered me distribution guarantees, which I then took to the Pathe Film Laboratory, which in turn gave me a certain amount of cash and all the laboratory work on credit. Corman convinced Aram Kantarian, an Armenian gentleman and contract negotiator at MCA, who wanted to get into producing, to put ten thousand dollars into the kitty. Together, Aram and I raised a few thousand more from a young entrepreneur in the construction business. With the grand sum of \$50,000 in the bank, we were ready to begin.

There were various vicissitudes of casting before *Night Tide* was launched. I had met Dennis Hopper a few years earlier when I showed my three avant-garde films at a coffeehouse on Sunset Boulevard. Afterward, he was full of praise for my work. I immediately thought of him for the leading role of the young sailor in *Night Tide*, and I asked him to read the script. He did and agreed to play the role. I first offered the role of Mora to Susan Harrison, whom I knew personally and who had recently been recognized for her work opposite Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis in *Sweet Smell of Success*. But she had a sleazy, drug-addicted boyfriend named Joel Colin who intervened by telling her to ask for more money. It was understood that everyone



who worked on the picture would work for union scale (at the time, \$350 a week), and our minuscule budget made even that difficult for us. Any additional salary was out of the question. Susan and her boyfriend would imply that things could still be worked out, but the time to begin principal photography was drawing near, and I had to have a firm answer. She was rehearsing the film's dance sequence with our choreographer, Benjamin Zemach, when I confronted her with our need for an immediate answer. She fled the dance studio in tears, and that was the end of that. Through friends, I quickly found Linda Lawson to replace her.

I had wanted Peter Lorre to play the Captain, but he would not work for such a minuscule salary. I even approached the wonderful French actor Marcel Dalio, who had given such memorable performances in Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion* and *The Rules of the Game*. But he, too, decided against it. Finally, someone led me to Gavin Muir, a very good actor who had appeared mostly in B pictures. He was perfect for the part, fulfilling the role exactly as I had written it. I cast Marjorie Eaton in the key role of the fortune-teller. She was a friend and had been a pupil of the great Michael Chekhov. Her own eccentricity as a person came across beautifully on film, especially in the scene with Dennis in which she gives him a highly ambiguous tarot reading.

We had preliminary readings and rehearsals of scenes at my apartment. The locations were rented, the soundstage space arranged, and sets were being built. I discovered, however, a tiny fly in the ointment. My landlady asked me the date we would start shooting. The date was already set in stone, but she told me I should postpone the start by a couple of weeks. "Why?" I asked. Astrologically, it was a bad time to begin anything: Mercury was in retrograde. Although I was powerless to change the start date, I was nevertheless curious to find out what she meant. She gave me a little pamphlet all about the significance of Mercury Retrograde. What I gathered was that it meant that anything begun under such aspects would very likely have to be redone a second time. *Stuff and nonsense*, I thought.

The first day's work was on one of the more complex scenes in the film. It was at the jazz bar where Dennis Hopper arrives

and meets Mora for the first time. My friends had agreed to be extras, and I even managed to get Barquette to appear as a customer at the bar. Barquette was a legendary trapeze artist and female impersonator. She had appeared in drag in Cocteau's *The Blood of a Poet* as the woman surrounded by handsome men in black ties who puts on makeup in an opera box. And now, thirty years later, he was appearing in *my* film! Not in drag, however. Cameron Parsons played the mysterious Woman in Black and spoke her lines in Greek, which she learned phonetically. How the speeches may sound to a person fluent in Greek, I still don't know, but she had valiantly memorized the words and delivered them well. In the end, it hardly mattered because she was such a striking visual presence that she might as well have been speaking jabberwocky. All in all, the shooting went well.

The following day we were shooting on the beach in Santa Monica. It was shortly after lunch when my production manager came walking across the beach with a pained expression on his face. He had been watching the dailies. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"I hate to tell you this, but . . ." he hesitated, "all the film we shot yesterday has been ruined in the lab." The astrological prediction had come true! We had to rerent the jazz club location, round up all my friends, and shoot the whole opening sequence again. This incident instilled in me a lifelong respect for astrology. I can't say I became a convert but perhaps an astrology agnostic. Time and time again, I have seen astrologers describe the nature of a person just from casting his horoscope. And it doesn't hurt to be wary during those months that Mercury goes into retrograde each year — not a time to start something new.

*Night Tide* was shot at a time that the Hollywood industry labor unions were very strong and demanding. Although we paid the actor's scale minimum, our cameraman and crew were totally nonunion. One day, when we were shooting at the merry-go-round on the Santa Monica Pier, we noticed a couple of guys eating hot dogs across the street eyeing us as we worked. Just the way they looked at us made me feel they were union workers checking us out. I was right. They called in the union to find out if we were a legitimate movie company. The

next thing we knew, several union officials arrived and asked to see our permits and papers. Fortunately, we were paying our actors scale, although without having signed a contract with the Screen Actors Guild. That problem was easily remedied by simply signing the Guild contract. The rest was more complicated. With the Taft-Hartley Labor Act in effect, no one could force us to use union labor, but the Hollywood film industry had its own special way of making producers shoot films with union workers. If a film didn't have a union seal on it, projectionists in theaters across the nation were forbidden to show it. We finally got around this by agreeing to shoot just one week with a union crew and cameraman. We decided to shoot the studio-built interiors — Mora's apartment, the hotel room, the police chief's office — with a minimum union crew and Floyd Crosby as cinematographer. This stretched our minuscule budget to the limit, but otherwise the film couldn't be released. Overall, the filming went quite well. Having a nonunion situation most of the time enabled us to go out with just our cameraman and an assistant or two and shoot whole sequences guerilla-style at our various locations, such as the paths and bridges of Venice and underneath the Santa Monica Pier. As a director, this gave me the luxury of time to get things right.

Dennis, having been given his first starring role, was totally cooperative and wonderful to work with. He had recently appeared as Rock Hudson's son in George Stevens's *Giant*. Just once, when Dennis felt I was hurrying him (and I was because of the restrictions of our budget), he resentfully told me that George Stevens didn't do that to him. I patiently explained that Mr. Stevens didn't hurry him because Mr. Stevens had millions of dollars to spend. Once I had pointed this out, I did not hear Dennis complain again. However, on the last day of shooting, the shit did hit the fan. We were filming the scene between Dennis and the police chief in his office in which Dennis talks about the mysterious Woman in Black. We did part of the scene in the morning and broke for lunch, intending to finish the rest in the afternoon. But when Dennis returned from lunch, he had downed several martinis and was three sheets to the wind. He couldn't even remember his lines, much less say them. After trying several times to get something acceptable on film, I gave

up. "Okay, that's it," I said. "We'll have to try again tomorrow."

Dennis staggered off the set. He had brought some bimbo back with him from lunch who was waiting for him, and together they got onto a motorcycle and sped away. Within an hour, we received news that Dennis had been in an accident and was in the hospital. We had run out of money by now and didn't know if we'd be able to finish the picture. We had to keep renting the set while Dennis recuperated. My producer, Aram Kantarian, somehow found a little more money to tide us over. I went to visit a very sheepish, apologetic Dennis in his hospital bed and assured him that everything would be all right. A couple of weeks later, our little crew reassembled, and we shot the rest of the scene. The film was finished.

This little cautionary tale about an actor who was perfectly fine throughout the shoot but falls apart on the last day is not unusual in filmmaking. The process of making a film provides an actor with an intense but transitory life. Many actors are like empty vessels that are filled by the role they are playing. When this intense period of life ends, they experience a terrible psychological letdown. By getting drunk that last day, Dennis was making sure, on an unconscious level, that his film life would not be over. He didn't want to give it up. I was reminded of this experience some years later when I was directing Julie Harris in a television show. She had played opposite James Dean in his first film, *East of Eden*. She told me that at the wrap party for the film, she looked around and didn't see Jimmy there. She thought he might be in his dressing room trailer, and she went looking for him. As she approached the trailer, she heard the most anguished sobbing from inside. She knocked on the door. Jimmy opened it, tears streaming down his face. "Oh, Julie," he cried. "It's all over. My life is over. What am I going to do?"

\* \* \*

Now I had to edit and finish *Night Tide*. The question of music for the film was an important one, and a friend suggested David Raksin. He was a celebrated Hollywood composer, having written the score for *Laura*. The song based on its memorable theme is still an oft-played standard. With almost

no money, I felt I had little chance of getting David to do it, but I managed to show him the first cut of the film. He liked it, and to my amazement, he agreed to do the score for virtually nothing. He wrote and conducted beautiful and touching music that considerably enhanced the effectiveness of the film. I was also lucky to meet Marvin Walowitz, a young sound designer just beginning his career. He put together a symphony of effects for the scene underneath the pier, with its crashing waves and Dennis's echoing voice.

The release of the film through Roger Corman's company had been set before the film was made, but Roger decided instead to give it to American International Pictures. This independent company had launched itself largely on the strength of Corman's series of Poe adaptations starring Vincent Price. A forgotten fact of the film business was that the practice of releasing double bills, consisting of an A picture and a B picture, was still prevalent in the 1960s. My little black-and-white film was released generally on a double bill with one of Roger's Poe adaptations, *The Raven*. Although I had completed the film in 1961, this did not happen until 1963, however. The film was held up by the Pathe Film Laboratory because the final bills had not been paid. Aram Kantarian and I kept trying to make them understand that their best chance of getting their money was to let the film be released, but it took a long time to convince them. In the meantime, I was invited to show the film at the Venice Film Festival. The lab allowed me one print and off I went.

Having been in Venice some years earlier as a journalist, I was friendly with Flavia Paulon, who ran the festival, and was welcomed back with open arms. I got out a flier to promote the film, but that was its only advance publicity. Nevertheless, the theater was mostly filled. It was the custom of the festival to have the director seated in a special box that overlooked the auditorium. It was from there that he was expected to take his bows or face an onslaught of boos at the end of the screening. I ran into Karel Reisz and Betsy Blair (formerly Gene Kelly's wife), and they kindly agreed to sit with me to bolster my courage. Betsy held my hand during the entire screening. The Italian critics were very kind to the film, with the Communist paper calling it "tense and hallucinating as a nightmare."

I had a wonderful time in Venice all over again. It is my favorite city in the whole world. Afterward, I took the print of my film to Paris to show at the Cinémathèque Française. Henri Langlois and Mary Meerson rolled out the red carpet on my behalf and arranged a VIP screening whose most notable guest, from my point of view, was Georges Franju. I had just recently seen his extraordinarily powerful *Le sang des bêtes* (*Blood of the Beasts*), a documentary filmed at the abattoirs of Paris. This is a film that I would hesitate to recommend to the faint of heart since it shows killing and butchery in close detail, with much flowing of fresh blood, and cattle on their way to the French dinner table. Of more interest to me was a Franju horror film that I had only at this point read about: *Les yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without a Face*). When I asked about it, he replied, “Je voulais faire un film qui pourrait vraiment vous faire peur.” (“I wanted to make a film that would truly frighten you.”) When I finally saw the film, I understood what he meant. Along with Carl Dreyer’s *Vampyr*, it is one of the few poetic horror films. It recounts the story of a doctor with a disfigured daughter who is determined to supply her with a new and beautiful face. In order to do this, he lures unsuspecting young women to his house and performs a surgical procedure in which he removes their face in an attempt to graft it onto his daughter’s. It is the detailed and realistic scenes of the surgery itself that are so horrifying. In the end, all his attempts are unsuccessful, and — in a stunning, lyrical moment — his daughter, still wearing her protective mask, frees the ferocious dogs that have guarded the house and wanders out into the night against a sky filled with white doves.

I left my print of *Night Tide* in the safekeeping of the Cinémathèque. It is this print that, years later, is still loaned to film festivals in Europe whenever they show my work. Back in America, Aram Kantarian and I arranged to have a theater in Upland, California, show *Night Tide* as a sneak preview. Upland is about as good a source for a middle-American audience as you could find. The film held the audience’s interest, and our preview cards were ninety percent “Excellent” and “Good.” But in Hollywood’s eyes, the film was not “commercial” (read: “conventional”) enough, and I received no particular attention because of it. One lowbrow producer told me that maybe if I

dubbed the film in French it would have a better chance as an “art” film. Even after *Time* magazine gave it a wonderfully laudatory review, saying that the film “emits an uncommon glow of freshness and imagination,” no one in Hollywood expressed interest. It played out its modest run on the double bill and that was the end of it.

# In-Between Times

## A Documentary & Roger Corman

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I had finished my first feature film, which was critically acclaimed but did not propel me into the director's chair of a big studio. I was still out of a job, and no one was standing in line to give me one. I appealed to my friend George Stevens Jr., who was working for the United States Information Agency (USIA) in Washington, D.C., supervising the making of governmental documentary films. He came to my rescue, offering me the task of making a short film about "productivity" in America. I thought about the theme and decided that I would relate the products made by American manufacturing to the use of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. I wrote a script called *The Four Elements*, and, after several meetings in Washington between George and me, he approved it. I chose the appropriate locations, which were mostly along the Eastern seaboard, and gathered together a small crew. Starting in New York, we were to travel southward and end up in New Orleans.

Billy Hale, later a very successful television director, was my cameraman. He was of Southern origin, and it was amusing to hear his accent thicken more and more through each state as we approached the Deep South. By the time we reached New Orleans, his drawl could have been cut with a knife. While he went to visit relatives in Georgia, I stayed in New Orleans for a few days to experience the legendary cuisine. At this time, the memory of Frances Parkinson Keyes's novel *Dinner at Antoine's* was still with us (even though, god forbid, I shouldn't have cared to read it), and visiting Antoine's proved to be a high point of my visit. Having dined alone in the outer tourist dining room, I was spotted by a kind waiter and given a tour of the



labyrinthine series of separate dining rooms. I was most taken with the huge collection of ashtrays from around the world on display there.

On the way home to Los Angeles on the Sunset Limited, I had a remarkable chance encounter. Shortly after we were en route, I noticed an elderly white-haired lady in the club car going over a large typed manuscript. I recognized her from having seen her perform in Los Angeles. It was Ruth St. Denis, a pioneer of modern dance in America, to whom Martha Graham admitted her debt. I assumed the manuscript must be her autobiography. I had seen her at the age of seventy do her version of Salome's "Dance of the Seven Veils," which is essentially a long striptease. What other dancer at such an advanced age would have had the nerve to strip of front of an audience? I must admit it was not the most edifying sight, but I greatly admired her courage. A sidelight of that performance was the presence of Isadora Duncan's brother, Raymond, who wore sandals and a Roman toga, and whom the managers of the theater temporarily banned from attending the show due to the unacceptability of his costume. But when his identity was revealed — together with the fact that he was a dear friend of Miss Ruth's (as she was called by her devotees) — they changed their minds.

I went over and introduced myself. Alone on the trip as she was, she seemed happy with my company. We had lunch and dinner together and had lively discussions about the arts and her career as a dancer. As we chatted, she was fond of saying, "If I were President..." And I felt that she would have made a very good one.

Back in Los Angeles, I finished editing *The Four Elements* but not without one creative battle with George Stevens Jr. He wanted a conventional musical score composed for the film; I wanted to orchestrate a symphony of sound effects for the major part of it, climaxing with a rapid cutting sequence scored to Vivaldi. I finally won out, and I was very pleased with the result. Unfortunately, *The Four Elements* could only be shown in foreign countries. Congress had decided that giving government money to USIA projects meant that the results could not be used to propagandize the American people. I managed to get a 16mm copy of the film for my own private

use, but by now this copy has, alas, lost its color, which was such an important part of the film's effect.

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Following the completion of *The Four Elements*, I was once again without work. This time, Roger Corman came to my rescue with an offer to write and direct a low-budget science-fiction movie. The film would make use of some spectacular special effects footage from a Russian film to which he had acquired the American rights. Corman owned many of these films, and it seemed to have been a wise investment. I was to devise my own story that would incorporate scenes of a space station on the moon (from the Russian footage) with scenes of an alien spaceship stranded on one of the moons of Mars (which we would shoot).

The Soviet film, *Mechte Navstrechu*, was a fable about the world's natural fears of the nature of aliens, and the discovery at the end of the film was that the ruler of the aliens simply wants to be friends with us. I turned my film, *Queen of Blood*, into the exact opposite of this. I devised a tale in which the queen of the aliens — brought back to earth by a group of American astronauts — is a vampiric creature who seeks a new food source for her dying planet. The food source, as it turns out, is the human race. Some years later, it was very flattering to realize that I had created the prototype for a whole series of science-fiction movies dealing with monstrous creatures from outer space, beginning with Ridley Scott's *Alien*.

Around this time, I met a young theatrical producer named George Edwards who had recently put on a very creditable production of Tennessee Williams's *Garden District* at a small local theater. During our first conversation, he had told me that he very much wanted to get into the business of producing films. When Corman offered me this opportunity, I remembered my talk with Edwards and suggested to Roger that George work with me as the producer of *Queen of Blood*. Roger agreed to it, thus launching George's new career. George became a most supportive and valuable ally in the making of the film, and we formed an important partnership that continued over the course of several films. He turned out to be the kind of

producer who had an uncanny ability to anticipate the needs of a director. He had a wonderful sense of humor, which enabled him to deal equally with the temperament of stars and the vagaries of writers. We became a creative team that would weather many storms together in the years to come.

We engaged a tiny movie studio, called in those days by the ridiculous title "Major Studio," in which to build our sets and shoot the film. The set designer and his assistant were two fellows whom Corman had imposed on us. Their task was to design and build a space station on the moon and the interior of a rocket ship. We approved the designs they submitted and construction began. But very little happened at the beginning, and soon our start date was looming. Each day George and I would stop by the studio to see how the work was progressing and would find our set designers in a state of utter relaxation as they casually smoked pot. "Don't worry," they would say. "Everything is coming along just fine." But it didn't look as if anything was "just fine," and George and I became more and more alarmed. Finally, the last weekend before shooting arrived, and they were still lying around on a half-finished set. We received the same litany as before: "Don't *worry*, you guys. We're working over the weekend, and it'll be ready bright and early Monday morning."

Come Monday, George and I arrived to the studio to discover our worst fears realized. The Corman protégés were working furiously to finish the set, but it was not ready. To make things worse, the distinguished Basil Rathbone was to arrive at any moment. Mr. Rathbone had accepted Roger's offer of five thousand dollars a day to play the space scientist presiding over the station on the moon. He was coming to the studio directly from a flight from New York and was expected promptly at six a.m. George had to muster all of his charm to greet Mr. Rathbone and steer him away from noticing the disastrous state of the set in which he would play his scenes.

"How perfectly wonderful to meet you, Mr. Rathbone. Curtis and I have so been looking forward to working with you. What would you like? Coffee? Tea? A donut perhaps?" George carried on with his usual aplomb while undoubtedly shaking inside. Meanwhile, I was on the set trying to speed things up. I had been promised a black floor on the space station that

would shine like glass and in which I would be able to photograph the reflections of the performers. This shiny black floor turned out to be sheets of black plastic that were already so covered with dusty footprints that no reflection could possibly be seen. At the same time, some of the crew were struggling to paste silver paper on wooden columns in an effort to make them look like metal girders. Unfortunately, none of them knew anything about hanging wallpaper. They had put the paste on the columns, not on the paper where it belonged, so when they pressed the paper into place, it created air pockets that produced bubbles in the surface. It was ludicrous, but we had no time to do it over. Later Mr. Rathbone ended up playing a close-up with a highly visible bubble on a supposedly steel girder behind him.

The other leading players in the film were John Saxon, Dennis Hopper, and Florence Marly. I had first become aware of Marly in Beaumont when I saw her in a 1930s movie magazine that included reviews of French films. Now all these years later, she was living in Los Angeles, and having met her socially, I decided that she would be the perfect choice to play the exotic and beautiful alien queen from outer space. I had to convince a reluctant Roger Corman of my choice. With his exploitation-movie mentality, I am sure he would have preferred a sexy young floozy in the part, and it would have become just another run-of-the-mill sci-fi exploitation film. Fortunately, I won Roger over to my cause, perhaps because I was so determined and enthusiastic. I turned out to be right in my hunch. Florence was wonderful in the nonspeaking part — eerie, intense, and otherworldly. John Saxon conveyed sincerity and kindness as the voyage's leading astronaut who becomes the alien's first victim on the voyage back home. And as a bow to all the science-fiction fans out there, I asked Forrest Ackerman to play the scientist who carries the space alien's deadly eggs off the ship at the end.

George Edwards's first producing experience was truly a trial by fire. The unions were still trying to squelch nonunion productions, and George had to use his best talents of diplomacy to deal with their aggressive representatives who arrived on the set looking for blood. After the shooting period, he had to deal with the Screen Actors Guild when Basil

Rathbone brought a complaint against us for working him overtime and not providing him with proper meals. All this was perfectly true, of course, but George had to pretend that at least it was not *entirely* true. Roger Corman, who was the real power behind the production, avoided accepting any responsibility, leaving George alone to face the music. We should have anticipated Rathbone's official complaint, because at the end of the last day of filming, in a grand final gesture, he threw a piece of plastic around his neck as if it were made out of the finest cashmere and announced, "You would even feed a dog better than me!" and stalked off the set. I was sorry to see our friendship with this great, legendary actor end so badly. I had enjoyed working with him. He was a consummate pro, a charming gentleman, and every day I would sit with him and ask him questions about his career. I only regret that at the time I quite forgot that he had worked with Garbo in *Anna*

*Karenina*. How I would like to have heard his thoughts about working with her.

Once the *The Queen of Blood* was finished, Roger Corman told me that he would give me a thousand-dollar bonus the day the film broke even. I was naïve enough to believe him, and once the film went into release, I would call his office periodically to see if I could pick up my bonus. Later I learned the bitter truth. The only time anyone participating in a film's profits receives anything is when the film makes so much money that its profits can no longer be hidden (what in Hollywood parlance is quaintly known as "Chinese bookkeeping"). Still, one day when I called, he answered the phone himself and told me to come in and get my check. Wonder of wonders, Roger turned out to be one of the more honest of Hollywood moguls.

# Under the Black Tower

## *Games and The Guests*

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*Queen of Blood* somehow came to the attention of an executive at a major studio. Ned Tanen, a protégé of Lew Wasserman at Universal, saw it and called George and me in for a meeting. He was interested in putting us under contract. Did we have any scripts ready to go? Had we made any other pictures that he should see? We told him about *Night Tide* and mentioned a horror script we had written called *Cadaver!* The film and the script clinched our deal. George would produce, and I would direct — possibly *Cadaver!*, possibly something else — and we were to check onto the lot immediately.

We were thrilled, eager, and ready to hit the big time. Universal City covered a space of several acres, replete with gigantic soundstages and a backlot of New York streets and European villages. It was dominated by the formidable “Black Tower,” a skyscraper from the top of which Lew Wasserman ruled his fiefdom. Of course, this was before the studio decided to take a page from Disney and open the studio to the paying public with tramway tours.

The tale of MCA’s deal to take over Universal Studios has been told elsewhere. It happened during the time that I was working for Jerry Wald at Fox. To my chagrin, I can remember when one day at lunch, an MCA agent told me that I ought to buy some stock in a new company that was being formed. I could have bought it at fifteen dollars a share, but I was ignorant and foolish and had no understanding of what was involved. I suppose I might have become a rich man had I heeded the advice. The founder of the Music Corporation of

America — originally an agency in Chicago handling the booking of jazz bands — was Jules Stein. He was the gray eminence behind Lew Wasserman, and indeed, the whole studio.

The Black Tower was furnished with expensive English antiques — lots of Chippendale and Jacobean pieces that gave the offices a formal and elegant look. It was known that this furniture had been personally collected by Mr. Stein and his wife, Doris, over the years. It suggested class and taste where there was none, hiding the venal moneygrubbing with a veneer of respectability. What couldn't be hidden was the cold aura of ruthlessness that pervaded the handsome corridors.

Of course, being a team of film creators, rather than Yale Business School graduates, we weren't worthy of being given offices in the Tower. We were assigned a couple of rooms in one of yesteryear's tacky outbuildings, a lingering legacy of the days when the studio was home to Abbott and Costello and W. C. Fields.

While *Cadaver!* was being budgeted, George and I felt we should come up with something more special and exciting as our first major studio venture. For a long time, I had nurtured a dream of working with Marlene Dietrich, and out of that longing came the idea for *Games*. The concept was this: a European woman, trailing clouds of faded glamour, enters the lives of a rich young couple as a cosmetic saleswoman, and later we discover she is not all that she seems.

We based the idea of the couple on my friends Dennis Hopper and Brooke Hayward, by this time married and easily the trendiest newlyweds in Hollywood. After making *Night Tide*, Dennis and I remained friends, although we did not see each other very often. Before marrying, Dennis led a very different lifestyle than I did. He smoked pot incessantly and spent a great deal of time in the pursuit of girls. He also wished to be more than just an actor. He wrote poetry, painted, was an excellent photographer, and allied himself closely with the world of contemporary art.

One night a few years earlier, Dennis invited me to accompany him to a birthday party being given by Stewart Stern for Joanne Woodward. Stewart was a successful young screenwriter who had written the script for *Rebel Without a*

*Cause* and numbered among his friends Marlon Brando and the Paul Newmans. During the party, Dennis got drunk and high on pot and began to recite some of his poems in a very loud voice. Joanne asked him to stop, but he ignored her and continued to declaim his latest literary effort at the top of his lungs. Suddenly Joanne, ordinarily the mildest and sweetest of persons, snapped. She grabbed an early American bed warmer that was propped against the fireplace and began to beat Dennis over the head with it. Tears rolled down her face as she screamed, "You have ruined my party!" Paul Newman quickly intervened and took the bed warmer out of her hands. By now Dennis had also started to cry. He stood up and confronted Paul, who had reached out to constrain him. All of Dennis's inner frustrations surfaced. Paul was a major star and Dennis was not. "I'm a better actor than you are," he sobbed. I drove Dennis home, and he did not stop crying the entire way there.

Not long after this, Dennis took off for New York to appear in a play. It was a theatrical version of the Southern potboiler *Mandingo*, in which Brooke Hayward was also to appear. They fell in love and got married. I met Brooke when they returned to Los Angeles. She was Hollywood blue blood all the way. Her father was Leland Hayward, the most elegant of all Hollywood agents, and her mother was the late movie star Margaret Sullavan. Brooke did not care for most of Dennis's scruffy, hippie-type friends, so possibly by default, I became the most acceptable of them in Brooke's eyes. I was often invited to dinner, and Brooke and I grew close. Dennis was aware of my sexual orientation, so this did not bother him in the least. Dennis and Brooke had put together a house that was filled with a mixture of pop art and art nouveau. The pop art was mostly Dennis's doing, but Brooke shared my taste for the turn of the century, and we often went antiquing together.

With Brooke and Dennis's glamorous lifestyle in mind, George and I wrote a sketchy, two-page outline of our idea and gave it to Ned Tanen. He loved it. Wasserman loved it. Who knows, perhaps even Jules Stein loved it. We interviewed various young writers, and after some waffling and hesitation, we settled on Gene Kearney, who was already under contract at the studio. He brought an ingenious and inventive imagination to the script, which was exactly what we needed to further



develop the idea. Even so, it was my first experience as a *director* working with a writer, and there were a few conceptual conflicts between us. A key scene in the film is one in which the cosmetic saleswoman, who is given temporary shelter by the kind young couple, opens the trunk filled with her belongings to reveal a pack of tarot cards, a feather boa, and — for the audience's eyes only — a case of dueling pistols. This scene seemed absolutely essential to me in the unfolding of the plot; Gene Kearney couldn't see it. He thought it unnecessary and superfluous. We argued, and finally I had to tell him to disregard his feelings and write it. He did so reluctantly but perfectly. I still don't see how the film could do without it.

Lew Wasserman wanted Jeanne Moreau to play the mysterious European visitor; I wanted Marlene Dietrich. I had a meeting with Mr. Wasserman and expressed my feelings. He shook his head. "No one would be interested in seeing her," he pronounced solemnly. I brought ammunition. I pointed out that she was currently the advertising icon for a major airline, pictured stretched out with her beautifully sculptured legs in a first-class airline seat. He was not moved. I countered that in her last movie appearance — a brief cameo as herself in the Audrey Hepburn vehicle *Paris When It Sizzles* — she had stepped out of a car looking marvelous. I had even asked the film's director, Richard Quine, about working with her, and he had assured me that "as long as she is kept in her key light, she looks great."

None of this mattered. Mr. Wasserman was adamant that Dietrich was a lost cause. We sent the script to Moreau. She turned it down. We had to find someone else. My agent, Hugh French, an elegant and stylish British gentleman who had contacts in Europe, suggested Simone Signoret. A recent Academy Award winner for *Room at the Top*, her very presence meant world-weary French glamour. From my point of view, she was an ideal second choice, preferable even to Jeanne Moreau. The script was sent to Universal's representative in Paris; he in turn, took it to Signoret in London, where she was appearing opposite Alec Guinness in a West End production of the "Scottish Play" (*Macbeth*). Word came back. She was interested but wondered, "Who is Curtis Harrington?" I remembered Mary Meerson had mentioned that Signoret was

one of Henri Langlois's admirers, and during the Nazi occupation attended clandestine screenings of forbidden films, like *Battleship Potemkin*, projected on the wall of his apartment. Mary would speak for me. I could hear her saying, "We adore Curtis. Oh, yes, you must do his film!"

Whatever Mary said, it worked. She would do the film. The next thing I knew, I was speaking nervously on the phone to the great star in London. Signoret had received terrible reviews for daring to play Lady Macbeth. The British critics were not accustomed to hearing the words of Shakespeare massacred by a French accent, and they hated her in the role. So it must have been with some relief that she was now able to look forward to starting a new film—her first in America—once the play closed. I remember her first words to me on the phone: "I warn you, Mr. Harrington, I am very *fat*!" She had indeed put on weight since her previous film, as I discovered at LAX when George and I greeted her as she got off the plane. But the great face, albeit a bit puffy, was intact, as was the warmth of her personality. I instantly felt that we would get along very well.

Katharine Ross was a photogenic beauty who had been discovered performing in a little theater in San Francisco and put under contract by the studio. I had no choice in her casting. She suffered from that affliction of American actresses, a much too high-pitched voice. Before we started shooting, I was determined to smooth and lower it. At my insistence, the studio hired her a voice coach — a grand dame of the old school, who spoke in rounded, dramatic tones. "Miss Ross has squeaks and rasps," she announced. "I shall be able to get rid of the squeaks and rasps, but I'm afraid I will *not* be able to make her sound like Tallulah Bankhead!" By the time we started shooting, Katharine's voice was pleasantly even and nicely lowered. I was delighted. Katharine was understandably insecure as an actress because of her lack of experience, so I directed her very closely, and I'm sure Signoret passed on some good advice. Halfway through shooting, I was told that Mike Nichols was considering Katharine for his next film and wanted to see some of my dailies. Of course I agreed, and as a result she was cast in *The Graduate*, the huge success of which catapulted her to movie fame.

James Caan had been cast at George's and my suggestion. We

couldn't afford a star name but we needed someone who, in my estimation, had the potential of becoming a leading man. We interviewed a number of up-and-coming young actors, but he seemed to me the best. Like most young actors at the time, he was influenced by Marlon Brando. His wardrobe consisted of jeans and T-shirts. Since he was portraying a young man married to a rich woman living in a fashionable Manhattan townhouse, we had to dress him up. We took him on a shopping spree at one of the best male clothiers in Beverly Hills. He liked the way he looked so much that when the film was finished, he bought his entire movie wardrobe for his personal use.

The employees of various departments at the studio were assigned to work on the studio's productions with little thought as to their suitability. The primary consideration was their availability. Hence we were assigned James Redd, a set decorator who was hopelessly unsuited to our picture. His primary credits seem to have been on westerns. We needed someone of extremely sophisticated taste and style. The right look for the picture was essential. At first, George and I tried to explain what we wanted, but Redd was incapable of grasping even the minimum of what we needed. Stacks of totally inappropriate furniture kept arriving on the set. We were horrified.

Finally, in desperation, we made a deal with Mr. Redd to take a paid vacation. While Redd was away, we would let our costume designer, Morton Haack, do the job without credit. This was something absolutely forbidden by the Set Decorators Guild, but we hoped to do it without any Guild officials noticing. We got away with it but not without a few dicey moments. Julia Heron, the seventy-year-old doyenne of set decorators at the time, became suspicious of what we were doing when she saw Morton selecting furniture in the prop department. Morton told her he was merely helping James Redd for a moment, and she was too involved in her own activities to pursue the question further.

Morton Haack was a costume designer whose main background was in the New York theater. He was a personal friend of George's, and we employed him at George's suggestion. He was a tall, slender fellow who wore horn-

rimmed glasses and shared with George and me a similar sense of humor. Simone was overweight; Katharine was slender. Morton's comment was, "I have to dress an elephant and a mouse." Katharine was a horsewoman, given to dressing much like her costar, in jeans and boots and horse-blanket ponchos. Morton's task was to transform this homespun cowgirl into a smartly dressed young New York matron. Our young actors were playing roles that indeed bore no resemblance to their personas in real life.

Bill Fraker, my cameraman, got his first feature film credit for *Games*. He would go on to win several Academy Awards for cinematography. At the time, I had seen some of the work Fraker had done on TV commercials, and I was very impressed with the quality of his images. For me, the cinematographer is my right hand. I always look for the ways he handles light. Although it is difficult to define what I like, I can easily recognize it. It is work that uses light and shadow, rather than color, to define itself. It seems to me that for many cameramen, variations in color are used to create visual contrasts, rather than light, which can tend to give a very flat look to a film. In terms of black and white, this kind of technical discernment led Sternberg to paint his sets entirely white, forcing all contrasts to be produced through the controlled distribution of light and shade. Bill Fraker's work held this knowledge and thus met my criterion for a cameraman. He gave the film a lush, rich, visual texture that greatly helped the film's effect. And I loved working with him. He was a prince of a fellow.

The studio had budgeted the film for a seventeen-day shooting schedule. This was an unrealistically short time to make the film, and after the second day, we were already behind schedule. Signoret also noticed that she was being kept on the set until seven, the result of a ten-hour workday. "I do not work after six o'clock," she announced on the second day, and walked off the set. This meant that I had to continue shooting until seven even when Miss Signoret wasn't present, which, in turn, usually meant shooting close-ups of Katharine Ross without anyone to whom she could deliver her lines. Katharine was extremely upset. The studio responded by producing a twenty-four-day schedule—a somewhat more reasonable possibility, but still tight. After this, Signoret pulled

me aside and said, "In this situation, my shoulders are broad, and yours are not. From now on, if you can't make the day's schedule, just blame it on me. Tell them I'm being difficult and that there's nothing you can do about it." She knew that as the star of the film, she was not expendable, and in the ruthless logic of the studio heads, everything else was. It was an extremely kind and gracious gesture, and I have felt eternally grateful to her ever since. She was much more than an actress and a star; she was a great human being.

In line with the absurd effort at the beginning of our shoot to saddle us with a seventeen-day schedule, the studio had promoted Ernest Nims, a longtime film editor, into a new executive position in the Black Tower. It was his particular job to go through scripts before they were shot and decide in advance which scenes would end up on the cutting room floor. The theory was that in this way, no money would be spent on anything that might not be required in the final film. This was another ridiculously impractical idea that was embraced with great fervor by the shadowy figures in the Black Tower. Although Nims gave our script his approval, during the shoot he was to watch the dailies, clock their length, and decide if the scenes being shot were running too long. If this was the case, something additional would have to be cut from the script before further shooting could take place.

Because the pace of some of Signoret's monologues was slow — possibly because she was not entirely accustomed to acting in English — a memo from Nims arrived telling us to cut out the Benda mask scene. This is a scene in which Ross and Caan, wearing masks, playact a ritual sacrifice as one of their many "games." We had employed Bob Baker, the proprietor of a Los Angeles marionette theater, to copy the style of Benda's masks for use in the scene. Benda was a famous mask maker in the 1920s whose work by this time was largely forgotten, but the scene was a favorite of mine, and I was determined to shoot it. How could we get around the dire edict of the Black Tower?

*Games* was shot mostly on a "closed set," which meant that we kept a cop at the door, and only officially sanctioned visitors were allowed entry. George and I put our heads together and decided to shoot the Benda mask scene while all visitors, including any strays from the Black Tower, were kept

outside. I shot the major part of the scene using extras hidden behind the masks, which left me with only about three shots using the principals as they unmasked at the end of the scene. All of this was filmed as quickly as possible, and before anyone could intervene, the sequence was “in the can.” When the dailies were shown, I waited apprehensively for the wrath of the Black Tower to descend. But there was only silence. I heard then that they loved the scene and wanted it in the film. Mysteriously, the memos from Ernest Nims ordering us to cut the scene disappeared from our files a few days later.

Shooting a film is more than just the transformation of the contents of a script into living images on the screen. It can be a wonderfully intimate experience of camaraderie among the participants. Each film represents a particular segment of life lived in intensely evolving circumstances. The greatest part of my experience on *Games* was getting to know Simone Signoret. The power represented by the Black Tower meant nothing to her. She had a pet name for Lew Wasserman. She called him “Lulu.” At lunch one day, she told George and Katharine and me the whole story of her husband Yves Montand’s involvement with Marilyn Monroe. The moment she realized what was happening between them, she went back to France. She believed that this could only be a passing fancy, though she admitted to suffering a few doubtful moments while she waited. Finally, she received a phone call from her husband from the Beverly Hills Hotel: “She’s outside the door, and I don’t want to see her. What am I going to do?” The way Simone described it, he behaved like an errant child coming home to Momma. It was her vindication. One wonders how many American wives could have been able to play it so cool?

It was well-known that Simone loved her scotch, and according to Florence Marly, a self-styled expert in such matters (who appears as one of the guests in the opening party sequence of the film), Signoret had a congested liver, which had excessively aged her face and made it puffy. One day, when we were all watching dailies with Bill Fraker, a close-up of Signoret flashed on screen that brutally showed the ravages of time. We all held our breath, waiting for some howl of displeasure from Simone. Instead, with a sigh of resignation, she said, “Well, what are you going to do?”

"We'll do it over, that's what," I announced emphatically, not at all sure that Bill could do any better a second time, but my comment relieved the tension of the moment. We indeed did re-shoot the close-up a few days later, and with the obvious help of diffusion filters, she looked much better. We all breathed a sigh of relief.

I managed to finish the shooting in the allotted twenty-four days. Our players and crew disbanded, and George and I were left with the task of editing the film. I had been given a couple of extra days with my cameraman to shoot some inserts: close-ups of a mysterious hand unscrewing fuses in the fuse box, and a corresponding shot of Katherine's hand screwing them back in. But for the climactic sequence leading up to the shooting death of a delivery boy, I wanted close-ups of the finches in the birdcage being agitated, a close shot of the cat that pushes over a flowerpot, and a close-up of Simone's gloved hand holding a crystal ball in a bookshop. The studio refused to give me the means to shoot these.

People find it hard to believe that even working for a huge Hollywood studio, I was forced to pay for and shoot these inserts on my own. In this case, I enlisted the help of Gary Graver, a personal friend who was known for working on the final films of Orson Welles. He brought a birdcage from the prop department to my apartment, filled it with rented finches, and shot what I needed there. It was my producer's small hand in Simone's black leather glove holding the crystal ball, and my own orange tabby that made his only appearance in a motion picture. Because of the unions, such independently shot footage could not be used in a major studio film; therefore, it was officially classified as "stock footage." Everyone conveniently ignored the fact that the footage was entirely specific to the film.

At last the rough cut was ready for viewing. A showing was arranged one afternoon for Mr. Wasserman and one of his associates. I was very nervous. The film ran exactly one hundred and ten minutes. When it was over, Mr. Wasserman walked up the aisle to leave. As he reached where I was standing, he said, "Cut ten minutes out of it," and walked out the door. That was all. How many times since then have I relished this wonderful moment! He didn't say, "I will send you

my notes.” He didn’t say, “I will let you know what needs to be cut.” He simply said, “Cut ten minutes.” In other words, I was left to decide what should be cut and what should stay. In this way, it would still be my film. Even if he hadn’t told me to cut ten minutes, I probably would have done so anyway. It was wise advice.

With *Games* completed, George and I were sent to New York on a publicity junket for the film. George had a terrible fear of flying, so we traveled on the Super Chief and 20th Century Limited. The studio put us up in style at the Plaza Hotel, and we each had suites that seemed to go on forever. I remember how, when the phone rang, I would have to run from one end of the suite to the other to answer it. A friend of George’s gave us a party, and we met Gloria Vanderbilt and Andy Warhol; we dined at Elaine’s and met Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones. The film received good, if not great, reviews, and the Signoret fans turned out in force. Mrs. Wagoner and my old girlfriend Bunny from Beaumont showed up, and we had a marvelous lunch together at the Plaza with Bunny and I reminiscing about the happy days of our childhood. George and I went on to Chicago and had lunch with Roger Ebert in the famous Pump Room, from which I stole a cup and saucer that I still have to this day.

\* \* \*

After our junket, George and I headed back to Los Angeles. We had to come up with something new. *Games* was not an unmitigated hit, and we began to feel that we were on trial. Eventually, we devised a new story about a retired theatrical producer who gives a weekend house party at his country estate where the guests are all given guns with which they can kill their host. He “has something” on all of them, and they know it: a past indiscretion — a past police record or a past murder, perhaps. All of his guests wish to keep their secrets and might be willing to kill to prevent their exposure. The host’s motive for this — possibly a strange suicide wish — is kept a mystery.

We called it *The Guests*. It was a gimmicky idea with lots of plot twists and turns, a perfect follow-up to *Games*. We asked



Joseph Stefano to write the script. We both knew him socially, and he had received great acclaim for his screenplay of Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Joe had also had great success in television as a writer and producer on *The Outer Limits*, a series that cleverly explored the edges of sci-fi and fantasy, with the basic premise of having some kind of monster in each episode. Joe liked the idea and the studio hired him. The script that he wrote had many virtues, but George and I felt it needed certain things that Joe was unwilling or unable to give it. It was similar to what had happened with *Games* when Gene Kearney couldn't see the need for the scene with Signoret unpacking her trunk. In that case, I had finally ordered him to write it. But if Joe didn't agree with you, he was not about to be ordered to do anything.

We finally had to part company. We then brought in Irene Kamp, a journeyman Hollywood writer from New York who usually collaborated with her husband, Louis Kamp. She was a friend of mine and I adored her. She had once taken me to a party given by the legendary Helena Rubinstein whom she knew from her early career as a staff writer for *Vogue* magazine. Irene was sophisticated and witty, just the writer we needed to put the finishing touches on the script. She called this kind of patchwork job "take-in writing," the literary equivalent of "take-in laundry."

Irene's contribution finally brought us the script that we wanted, and word came to us that we could meet with Mr. Wasserman to discuss casting. Because it had been through my own contacts that we had gotten Simone Signoret for *Games*, Wasserman decided to throw down the gauntlet to me again. We agreed that a likely star for the film would be Kirk Douglas. But instead of the studio agreeing to make an offer to Mr. Douglas, as is customary, Wasserman only suggested that I try to get the script to him.

And thus I had my first experience of the old Hollywood catch-22: "We'll finance your film if you get a certain star." But without a "firm offer," you can't get the script to the star in the first place. In my naïveté, I made an appointment to see Freddie Fields, Mr. Douglas's agent. Despite my assurances that Mr. Wasserman had promised to make the film if Mr. Douglas would do it, he was adamant. "I'm sorry, Curtis, I couldn't

possibly give the script to Mr. Douglas without a firm offer.”

I didn't know Kirk Douglas. I didn't have any friends who knew Kirk Douglas. How could I possibly get him to read my script? I tried to find out his home address, but I couldn't obtain that either. Finally, I remembered that he had his own production company, Bryna Productions. That was an address I could find. I sent the script, with a long cover letter explaining my plight, to Kirk Douglas c/o Bryna Productions. A week later, I received a call from someone at Bryna: could I come in for a meeting? I could and did. But the news was not favorable. Yes, Mr. Douglas had read the script but “felt it was not for him.” Nevertheless, he thought that there might be something for me to do at Bryna Productions sometime, and I was to keep in touch.

It was then that an agent came by our office and told us that Tony Curtis was looking for something to do. Perhaps our script might be suitable for him? Yes, he could play the part. Why not? I gave the script to the agent. From my point of view, Tony Curtis was as big a star as Kirk Douglas. *Some Like It Hot* and *Sweet Smell of Success* were huge hits. I thought that if Tony Curtis liked it, I could go to Wasserman with a casting idea that was already in the bag. And Tony Curtis *did* like it! I had a lovely conversation with him on the phone. He understood the part and offered some good ideas for its interpretation. I was thrilled. Before I could tell Mr. Wasserman personally, this time he shunted me off to one of his second-in-command executives. So I told him about Tony Curtis. “Tony Curtis!” he exclaimed contemptuously. “That bum. We wouldn't have him in a picture here in a million years. He's finished. Washed up. Forget it.” I couldn't believe it. What had happened? One day Tony Curtis was a big star, and then overnight, for no apparent reason, he was consigned to the trash heap. My dreams for a quick launch of the picture were shattered.

Then a new idea for the project came into play. One of the studio's executives had given the script to someone at NBC. They were looking for scripts for their program of full-length TV movies, and they wanted to do it. George and I were whisked into meetings, casting was discussed, and we went scouting for locations on the backlot and in Pasadena. We continued the casting process as if it were a done deal.

For the role of the imperious and demanding mother of the theatrical producer, I wanted either Miriam Hopkins or Elisabeth Bergner. I had deeply admired Elisabeth Bergner since I first saw her as a teenager in *Stolen Life* in 1939. It just so happened she was being honored with a retrospective of her films at the San Francisco Film Festival. Without any authorization from the studio, I took the script with me and went to San Francisco, determined to meet her and see if she might be willing to play the role.

It was an extraordinary experience. She was seventy years old, but when she greeted me in her hotel room, she seemed all of forty. Perhaps there were a few lines in her face, but otherwise she was the same vibrant, youthful, energetic creature I had seen in the theater and on film. She told me that she had performed a reading of Friedrich Schiller at the local Goethe Society. The audience would have been largely made up of her contemporaries from the German expatriate colony in San Francisco. "They are all so *old*," she lamented. I could imagine them arthritically hobbling in to see her, when she was still bounding about with the vitality of a teenager. She had the same ageless quality that I had noticed in Anaïs Nin: it is the quality of the artist who in his or her creativity lives beyond the limitations and strictures of time.

I returned to Los Angeles to be greeted by George in a state of shock. "What on earth has happened?" I asked. "NBC is canceling the show," he replied. We were called into a meeting with Walter Scott, the head honcho at NBC. The meeting might have been written by Lewis Carroll. I found myself defending our project in a dialogue of pure jabberwocky. "But there is no violence in *The Guests*!" I declared. Alas, this was a period of time in the fortunes of the television business in which they were the whipping boys for the Mrs. Grundys of America — the right-wing religious nuts who had decided that there was too much violence and sex on TV. It was a patent absurdity, but the current agitation was nevertheless a fact. Mr. Scott put on what he must have thought was a look of great wisdom, but actually came across as dull stupidity. "Ah," he said, as if announcing the Second Coming, "but there is the *threat* of violence." Of course, if this statement were followed as a matter of judgment, most of Western literature would have to be placed off limits to

the poor, unsuspecting public. But the great mogul had spoken, and the meeting came to a close. *The Guests* was never made.

## ***What's The Matter With Helen?***

### **Exit the Black Tower**

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With *The Guests* off the table, we were back to square one at Universal. The Black Tower loomed. It was then that we remembered a little story outline that had been given to us by Henry Farrell called “The Box Step.” Because of the great success of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, Henry was a hot writer in Hollywood. His was a good name to attach to a project. “The Box Step” was a contemporary thriller about a couple of women who run a ballroom dance school for adults and become involved in a murder. We desperately needed to get approval for another project, so George and I thought about Farrell’s story and decided it could be given more excitement and style by changing the setting from a contemporary ballroom academy to a theatrical dance school for children in the 1930s. We’d base it on the famous Meglin Kiddies of the Depression era.

We were given the green light by the studio to develop the idea into a screenplay, and we engaged Henry Farrell to write it under our supervision. After the usual ten weeks of work to produce a first draft screenplay, we came up with something that was quite effective. We called it *The Best of Friends*. Lew Wasserman liked it but slipped back into his old trick of challenging us to find an acceptable star for it before giving the green light to start shooting.

We needed an aging actress who could dance, and my first thought was Joanne Woodward. She was hardly noted for her singing and dancing, but I was sure that her immense talent would permit her to fake it. However, she turned us down. She

claimed that she liked it, but Paul, whose approval was needed, didn't think it was right for her. We tried to get the script to Shirley MacLaine, but with the same lack of success that I had had with Kirk Douglas, and for the same reason: no firm offer. George and I had a friend who knew Rita Hayworth. She had been a big star of musicals. Who could ever forget *Gilda*? She had danced with Fred Astaire. We thought it was a wonderful idea. Our friend gave her the script to read, and we were invited to meet with her at her home in Beverly Hills.

Miss Rita Hayworth greeted us personally at the door of her handsome house and, after giving us drinks, led us out into the garden where we sat by the pool. She made us feel at ease, and we both found her enormously likeable. She had enjoyed our script and was considering it carefully. We told her how perfect we felt she would be in the part and spoke of our admiration for her films. The conversation was warm and relaxed. I was personally thrilled at having such an encouraging meeting, and although she was past the prime of her stardom, her name still merited lights above the marquee throughout the world. She could be just the star we needed to put the project over with the executives at the Black Tower. Finally, we got up to go. Rita, who had been sipping from a glass of water during our conversation, put it down to see us out. We strolled down the long hallway that ran through the house, chatting amiably along the way. She opened the front door for us, and as we stepped outside, we turned back for a moment to say goodbye and express how much we had enjoyed meeting her. Suddenly, without warning, her face crumpled with anguish. "You're laughing at me, aren't you?"

I could hardly believe my ears. "Oh, no," I protested. "No, not at all. Please believe me." My own sudden anguish almost matched hers.

"Yes, you are," she insisted. "I know you're laughing at me."

George mumbled his own protest. Neither of us really knew what to do or to say. She closed the door. It was not until much later that we learned that she suffered from Alzheimer's disease and that this must have been an early manifestation of it. The incident remained in my memory as a deeply disturbing experience. I felt such compassion and pity for this beautiful and famous woman who was now overcome by those demons

of insecurity and fear.

When George and I were working on the lot, we found out Bette Davis was appearing in an episode of *It Takes a Thief* as a courtesy to her friend Robert Wagner. George arranged for us to have lunch with her. I knew she had a reputation of being hell on wheels when she was out of sorts, but she was in a delightful mood that day. More as a conversational gambit than anything else, George said that we were thinking of making a sequel to *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* Bette immediately replied, "And I'll tell you the first scene, too. It will be *this* one putting flowers on *that* one's grave!" Then she commented, "The trouble with poor Joan is that she had absolutely no conversation, except to talk about herself, of course." Clearly no love lost between these two icons of the screen. We sent Bette the screenplay for *The Best of Friends*. After some days, she sent it back to me with a note, "I'm afraid I must turn this one down. I love Henry's writing, but I just don't want to be in another movie where I have to drag a corpse around."

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Time went by, and still we had not managed to come up with a star who would give us the certainty that our film would be made. All the while, George and I were still under contract and being paid each week. The studio decided to get their money's worth — at least with me anyway — and assigned me to direct a few episodes of a new television series called *The Survivors*, starring Lana Turner. It seemed only yesterday that Lana Turner had been the biggest movie star in the lexicon of Beaumont High School, and here I was about to direct her.

Miss Turner was still petite and attractive, but she had had some sort of minor face-lift that had left her perfectly formed Turner mouth not quite the same. In agreeing to do the series, she had insisted that her contract specify that she would never be required to wear the same dress twice in one show. The practical result of this was that an enormous number of costumes had to be designed and executed in time to fit into the whirlwind of a tight TV schedule. The trappings and imperatives of MGM stardom were hard for her to relinquish. The realization that she had entered a whole new world only

gradually came to her, for in her attitudes and prerogatives she was still very much the movie star.

I liked Lana Turner. She did indeed remind me of the other young girls I had known in Beaumont. She did not at all seem to be a worldly woman who had been married seven times. Her new husband, whom she talked about constantly with a kind of breathlessness that suggested first love, was a night club magician. Without meeting him, I judged that he was mainly interested in her fame and money. But she clearly had no sense of this and would ask me frequently if she could finish early and rush home to him.

By this time, she had absorbed a few ideas about "The Method," Lee Strasberg's school of acting from navel self-examination. She kept asking me about her "motivation" and would pull me aside and sit down for lengthy discussions about the import and meaning of the scenes. I realized that there was not time for this, but as she was the star, I felt that reining her in was the producer's job, not the director's. Of course, in the end I was the one who was sorely criticized for going over schedule. Despite all her talk about Method-style acting, I received a wonderful glimpse one day of what really motivated her. There was a scene in which she descended the stairs on her way to breakfast with her son. She wore a long green dressing gown and raised her arm to adjust her hair as she came down. We rehearsed it, and without comment, I shot it a second time. She came over to me afterward.

"Did you notice what I did with my hair?" she asked.

Thinking along lines of method and motivation, I replied, "Oh, yes, a very good choice. You would just have been putting on your dressing gown to come down and have breakfast with your son, and a little last-minute primping as you descended the stairs was perfect."

She smiled proudly. "I did it," she confided, "to show off the line of the gown."

You can take the girl out of MGM, but you can't take the MGM out of the girl! A few weeks after we finished shooting, I heard that Lana's husband had stolen money from her bank account and skipped town.



In my rare off time between television work and *The Best of Friends*, I decided to track down anything I could find on one of my all-time favorite movies, James Whale's *The Old Dark House*. The film had been shot at and released by Universal, but since then there had been an unfortunate and substandard remake directed by William Castle in 1963, and Universal no longer had the rights to the story. This prevented Universal from rereleasing it or showing it on television. I had a friend in the editorial department there, and for months I begged him incessantly to find out what had happened to it. Eventually, someone in New York located the original nitrate negative, but by this time, it had deteriorated so badly that making a new print seemed impossible. Fortunately, they did have the lavender protection print. I immediately set about looking for money to restore the film, sending entreaties to Eastman House, the Museum of Modern Art, the Library of Congress, and the American Film Institute. James Card, who was the head of Eastman House, contacted me and was enthusiastic. Eastman House would put up all the money for the restoration and new prints. They made several beautiful 35mm copies, and I went to work getting clearances from Columbia's legal department. Today the film is available again and gaining a whole new audience. I had stepped in at just the right moment.

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Our contract came up for renewal, and with no production in sight, George and I were let go. Before walking out the door, though, we managed to get a promise from our mentor in the Black Tower, Ned Tanen, that we could purchase back the rights to *The Best of Friends* for \$50,000. We decided to take up his offer. We had spent so much effort working on it that we felt we might one day find a niche for it elsewhere.

Over at Warner Brothers, a former publicist named Ed Feldman had been given a producer's contract to make a film out of the Boileau-Narcejac-penned French thriller *Choice Cuts*. The authors were a team of clever French mystery novelists whose novel *The Living and the Dead* provided the basis for Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. My agent convinced Ed Feldman that he ought to hire me to direct *Choice Cuts* and collaborate on a new

screenplay. I met Ed, we hit it off, and the next thing I knew I was sitting in a large office on the Warner Brothers lot. For one glorious moment, it was thought that I might become the new big thing in Hollywood. Various agents and producers who heretofore had ignored me came by to pay their respects. What the hell, being friendly toward me for one second just might pay off. Better than being assured of the cold shoulder if I *did* come up with a hit!

But my moment of glory was short-lived. It turned out that Ed Feldman's contract to produce pictures at Warners was not quite what it seemed. In Hollywood parlance, it was a special kind of contract given to him as a way to ease him slowly out of the studio at the end of his contract as a publicist. In this case, it happened sooner rather than later, and I was eased out with him. However, all was not lost. George Edwards and I showed Ed Feldman *The Best of Friends* script. He liked it and had an idea for how it might get made. He happened to know that Debbie Reynolds was looking for a picture to do in connection with her television contract at NBC. Apparently, in getting her to agree to do a series for them, they had offered to finance one feature picture for her also. *The Best of Friends* could be it.

George and I were thrilled. Debbie would be perfect for the role of the ex-hoofer who starts a dance school for children to cash in on the Shirley Temple craze. Ed somehow got the script to Debbie, and we were told that she had read it but wasn't sure that it was right for her. Now our job was to convince her that it *was* right for her. The only problem was that neither of us knew her, and we certainly weren't going the agent route in an effort to meet with her. We had to use our ingenuity. We found out that she was rehearsing a musical number over at MGM. We finagled our way through the studio gates and found the door to the soundstage. We took three deep breaths and went through the door.

A tinkling rehearsal piano greeted our ears. It was just like a scene out of *42nd Street*. There was the tap-dancing star rehearsing with a chorus line behind her. When the rehearsal finally ended, Debbie headed for her dressing room.

We headed her off. "Oh, Miss Reynolds — "

"Yes?"

"We were, ah . . ." We were suddenly at a loss for words.

Fortunately, I found something to say that she would remember. I mentioned that she and I had both been at an MGM auction together and that it was I who was constantly bidding against her on behalf of the Cinémathèque Française.

"Oh, yes, I remember. We should have gotten together."

"Yes, but," I explained in a gush of words, "I hadn't been at an auction before and I didn't know."

"Well, it's too late now, isn't it?" She came right to the point. "What is it you boys want?"

She was not unfriendly and put us at ease. We explained how much we wanted her to do our picture and how wonderful she'd be in the part. She listened, and I really believe at that moment, she began to think seriously about our project. Certainly, from then on things started to go more smoothly.

Ed Feldman was working with Martin Ransohoff to put together our project with Debbie, along with the financing from NBC. Ransohoff was one of the more active independent producers in Hollywood who had made such films as *Ice Station Zebra* and *Catch-22* under his banner. He seemed to be no better or worse than most studio executives and Hollywood veterans. He had a likable and congenial demeanor that did not entirely hide the ruthless survival streak of such animals. Ed served as the conduit between Martin, George, and me, but he was watching out for Ransohoff's interests more than ours. We had merely left the shadow of the Black Tower for the shelter of a couple of independent operators working out of the same mind.

Now we had a star in Debbie Reynolds, and we were able to move forward with the film. We changed the title to *What's the Matter with Helen?*, and George and I proceeded with the next of our creative tasks. The first of these was to cast the other roles. We were given permission to offer the key role of Helen to Shelley Winters. We did this through her agent, Jack Gilardi, since we could make a firm offer, but this time it wasn't really necessary because Shelley was an old friend and she agreed to do the part. I thought Agnes Moorehead would be perfect to play the evangelist, and she immediately agreed to do it, if only because she was a friend of Debbie's. George and I both liked Dennis Weaver for the role of the Texas millionaire, and he

promptly agreed as well. He liked the part because it gave him more of a chance to be a romantic leading man than he had been before.

This left two more small but important roles to cast. The choice of both of them was mine. For the part of the diction teacher in the children's school, I needed a grand British actor who brought with him an aura of a rich theatrical past. This meant John Gielgud or Ralph Richardson, both of whom were beyond our budget. There were a few third-rate character actors in Hollywood with vaguely British backgrounds who might have played the part, but they would have brought nothing more than mere competence to the role. I wanted an actor of distinction and style.

Presented with this conundrum, I suddenly thought of the great Irish actor Micheál MacLiammóir, whom I remembered from his performance as Iago in Orson Welles's *Othello*. That had been twenty years ago, but fortunately he'd had a small part in a more recent film, John Huston's *The Kremlin Letter*. I mentioned this to my casting director, Caro Jones, a charming lady who seemed to have a better knowledge than most in Hollywood of the international scene. She knew exactly who I was talking about, thought it a wonderful idea, and promptly contacted his representatives in Ireland. The next thing I knew, a script was on its way, and we had received an answer. Yes, he would accept if he could bring his longtime companion, Hilton Edwards, with him. Hilton was his lover of forty years and the comanager of their Gate Theatre in Dublin. The cost for the extra fare and expenses was squeezed out of our budget, and the character of Hamilton Starr (two r's but prophetic nonetheless) became a reality.

I had my heart set on Timothy Carey to play the tramp who asks Debbie for a handout. He was notoriously difficult to deal with and had an aggressive personality that frightened many people. Most producers didn't want to work with him, but to the many creative directors who loved him — like Kazan, Cassavetes, and Kubrick — he was unique and irreplaceable. I was one of those directors. I ordered Caro to offer him the part and make a deal with him. Still, there were a few sticky moments. One day she called me in terror to tell me that Timothy had warned her that he owned some vicious dogs and

that if he didn't get the part he would let them loose on her! I calmed her down and she made the deal.

Martin Ransohoff had been the producer of the hugely popular TV series *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which was made at a small studio in Hollywood that Ransohoff owned. We were provided these soundstages to build our sets. We hired Jean Renoir's designer, Eugene Lourie, to design them and Debbie Reynolds's friend, Jerry Wunderlich, to decorate them. The sets for the film were extremely important, and I wanted their period detail to be impeccable. I used memories of my childhood in Los Angeles in the 1930s to help authenticate these details. For instance, one day I visited the kitchen set while it was being built and discovered to my horror that a contemporary faucet had been installed in the sink instead of a period one. Because Lourie was not American, I had to be sure that his choices were correct for the time and place. He did a great deal of his own research, and so most of what he did was fine, but there was still the occasional anomaly like the faucet on the sink. This meticulous effort was rewarded when one of the leading London film critics said of the film that "as a period reconstruction, it is sensational."

Morton Haacks's wonderful costumes offered another authentic period touch but unfortunately not for Shelley Winters. After approving Morton's sketches and his choice of fabrics and attending all the fittings, Shelley decided on the first day of shooting that she didn't want to wear them. Some of them she literally trampled on and tossed out of her dressing room trailer. Poor Morton was horrified and walked off the set. This left her with nothing to wear and prevented us from shooting. It was a real crisis. Shelley's agent, Jack Gilardi, was sent for. With Shelley pouting behind the firmly closed door of her trailer, Feldman and Ransohoff threatened to replace her with Geraldine Page. This must have sent a dagger of fear into Shelley, and she began to offer suggestions of compromise. There were two costumes that she especially hated. They were too elaborate, and they made her look fat. If only Morton would design her something in period style that was dark and simple, she would agree to continue. Morton was forced to do it, but it took away all the unique character that he had designed into the costumes. It was really a pity.

The fact of the matter was that Shelley was heavy, and Debbie was slender. This made for a wonderful contrast in the characters on screen, but Shelley was jealous. The contrast was visible in every scene between them, and it upset her. Her vanity was sorely wounded. Actors — all actors in my experience — are beset with insecurities. I don't mean to demean them when I say that they are like children. I tend to call them "my children" when I am working with them. They need constant reassurance and support. I have never understood directors who have a reputation for making actors uncomfortable. On the contrary, they need to feel at ease to do their best. Their very profession offers enough elements of discomfort without them being added to by their director. Unlike the work of other artists, who have an objective medium outside of themselves to display as their creative work, actors have only themselves. Their bodies, faces, and voices are their medium and, therefore, the subject of intense scrutiny. This breeds excessive self-consciousness, narcissism, and pride. It can hardly do otherwise.

This helps explain why Debbie and Shelley, though friendly enough on the surface, were unconscious rivals throughout the production. In the mornings, I would arrive on the set and Shelley's secretary would come running toward me to tell me that Shelley wanted to see me immediately in her dressing room. I would no sooner start in the direction of Shelley's trailer than Debbie's secretary would head me off insisting that I come to discuss the day's work with Debbie immediately. The sword of Solomon was slicing me down the middle every day. My production manager even paid me the compliment of telling me that I was the new George Cukor. George had been famous as the best "women's director" because of his extraordinary talent and diplomacy in handling the most temperamental of female stars.

I tried to keep both stars happy, and most of the time I succeeded. But one crisis between them went beyond even my ministrations. I had to leave the set for a while, and when I returned, the assistant announced to me that Shelley had left the set and was threatening to go home. I couldn't imagine what had happened. I knocked on Shelley's dressing room door.

"Who is it?"

“Curtis.”

She let me in. She had taken off her costume and undone her hair. The moment I saw this, I knew that at least an hour or more of shooting time had been lost. It would take at least that long to put her back together again.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“It’s Debbie. I can’t work when the crew is laughing. I can’t concentrate. That’s all she does — tell jokes and make them laugh.”

I knew that it was in Debbie’s nature to let off steam and tension by amusing the crew. She was a natural-born clown, and she loved pratfalls and shtick. In truth, she was a much better actress than she realized, but she was only comfortable with comedy. I certainly knew that what she did was not intended to upset Shelley.

“Don’t worry,” I said to Shelley. “I’ll speak to Debbie.”

I went to Debbie, where, at that very moment, she had the crew in stitches. I pulled her aside. I explained what had happened and asked her to please cool the clowning for a while.

Debbie is an enormously kind and sympathetic person, and she agreed to adopt a low profile for a while if it would help Shelley.

Of course, to everyone Shelly’s antics seemed more like a bid for sympathy than an effort to help her concentration. But we knew that if we didn’t humor her, there would be hell to pay. Shelley was still pouting with resentment when I returned to her dressing room. She kept repeating, “I just can’t work this way. I really ought to go home.”

I remembered some of my Krishnamurti training — the importance of dying to the past, of living fully in the moment. The laughter of the crew was over. I interrupted Shelley in her mutterings. “Listen. You don’t hear any laughter now, do you?” This brought her up short. She looked surprised. She listened to the silence. “You see? It’s over. It won’t happen again. Now let’s get back to work.”

It was really Debbie who had a right to be irritated at what Shelley was doing. One day Shelley brought a small portable phonograph to the set and began playing selections from Puccini operas before each scene. She claimed that the music

put her in the proper mood to act and that she couldn't act without it. Shelley had had two Italian husbands and, apparently, an emotional connection with the music of Puccini had been formed. The music in and of itself was beautiful, but it was Shelley's process of getting to it that was so irritating. She kept trying to put the needle down on the exact passage that she wanted but failed to hit the spot time after time, resulting in much audible scratching of the record. It seemed at times as if she would never find what she wanted, and so we waited, being driven almost mad with the noise and frustration of it.

Even after Morton had acquiesced to her wishes, Shelley was never fully satisfied with the costumes, and one night while attempting to adjust the shoulder straps of a dress, she accused me of trying to make her look ridiculous. This was easily the farthest thought from my mind. On another occasion, after watching the dailies, she called our cameraman, Lucien Ballard, out on the carpet for lighting Debbie in a more favorable way than her. He assured her that he did not play favorites, and she was mollified for a while. Afterward, Lucien took me aside and told me that of course she was right, that he lit Debbie in a way that would emphasize the sweetness and light of her character, and Shelley in a way that was darker and more forbidding. This is what she had noticed. But she interpreted it as favoritism, not artistic choice.

During some off time on the set, Debbie gave George and me a demonstration of her extraordinary powers of mimicry. Anyone lucky enough to have seen her nightclub act knows how amusing her celebrity impersonations of people like Barbra Streisand and Zsa Zsa Gabor can be. The ability to mimic depends, to a great degree, on the powers of observation the mimic commands. Debbie has these powers to a remarkable degree, which enabled her not only to imitate the well-known mannerisms of celebrities, but to mimic with equal effectiveness the behavior of friends. On this occasion, she "did" George and me. She captured George beautifully, and I only too readily recognized myself in her impersonation of me. It was so spot-on, it was uncanny. We then asked her to give her impersonation of one of our other producers, but she refused. Later she explained that she can only mimic people



whom she likes.

Soon after finishing *What's the Matter with Helen?*, I had to leave for England to make my next film, *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* As far as promoting *Helen*, I felt that I had left it in capable and interested hands. George had worked as a publicist early in his career, and our executive producer, Ed Feldman, had been a highly regarded publicist for years. Ed assured me that he had all sorts of ideas for promoting and publicizing the film. I went to London full of confidence that *Helen* would be effectively launched. I could not have foreseen that United Artists, the company releasing the film, was saving all its money and its big guns to release *Fiddler on the Roof*. They had money invested in *Fiddler* and none in *Helen*. My picture, after all, had been financed by NBC; all United Artists had to do was pay for a minimum number of prints and an equally minimum amount of advertising. Ed Feldman did absolutely nothing to prevent the debacle.

The advertising was little more than a joke. When we had shot the final scene of the film in which the dead body of Debbie is revealed strung up on a ladder wearing her military costume from her dance act, I had not wanted to make any stills of it. The image was supposed to come as a surprise and a shock, since it revealed the ending of the film. You can imagine my horror when I saw the cheaply produced poster for *Helen*. It used the very image that I had not wanted revealed anywhere! People instantly knew the ending of the film before they saw it. I asked myself what idiot in the UA publicity department had decided to do this. And why didn't George or Ed Feldman prevent it? The brutal truth was that *Helen* was simply being sacrificed by UA upon the altar of what they refer to as "summer cash flow." Any money that came in was profit since they didn't have any investment in the film. At a time when there was a huge swell of nostalgia for the 1930s, the newspaper advertising gave no clue about the real nature of the film. The ads made it look like an ordinary, a very ordinary, contemporary story about a murder. Ed Feldman, who had promised bookings on talk shows with both Debbie and Shelley, arranged nothing. The film sank while I was in England and, upon my return some months later, was forgotten.

UA's release of the film in Europe followed the same pattern of indifference. When it opened in London, it received unanimously superb reviews. *Variety* noted that it didn't receive a single mediocre or bad one. Yet even this did not inspire UA to promote the film in any way. I happened to be in Italy when it was first released in Rome. They gave it the deepest possible insult: it opened during *Ferragosto*, a European holiday falling in the dog days of summer when the city is virtually deserted. It might as well have not played at all.

A year later, Debbie opened on Broadway in a revival of the musical *Irene*. The show was a big hit and scheduled to run for months. Debbie was very proud of her work in *Helen* and had been disappointed that it had received such an indifferent release. Together we went to see the UA executives to plead with them to give the film a second chance in New York by reopening it and giving it a new run, which Debbie promised to publicize every night from the stage of the theater where she was playing. This couldn't help but stimulate business from the people who filled the sold-out theater every night to see Debbie's new show. But our entreaties were ignored. The film wasn't given a second chance.

Of all my films, *Helen* is the one I personally like the best. It comes closest to realizing in all its details what I intended. It deals with the underlying themes of Eros and Thanatos — the will toward life and the will toward death. It is my portrait of the destructive narrow-mindedness of Christian fundamentalism, as exemplified by the character of Helen, whose hypocritical inability to face the truth of her sexuality brings only tragedy to those around her and madness to herself.

Through the years, the film has finally begun to be appreciated. A showing at the BAM Rose Cinemas in Brooklyn filled the theater, and the film was met with rapturous applause. The critic and film historian Elliott Stein spoke to the audience afterward and answered the most oft-asked question: "Who is Curtis Harrington, and what other films had he made?"

# ***Whoever Slew Auntie Roo? and The Killing Kind***

**Plus the Ones that Got Away**

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Despite her neurotic tantrums, Shelley Winters liked working with me and wanted me to direct her next film. This was a project being made under the banner of American International Pictures (AIP), the independent company headed by James Nicholson and Samuel Arkoff. Roger Corman's series of cheaply made Poe adaptations starring Vincent Price had turned out to be a gold mine for them, and Nicholson and Arkoff were by now well-established figures on the Hollywood scene. They had not reached major status, but they were considered to be at the top of the minor leagues. They had been talking to me about directing a new version of *Wuthering Heights*, so I was already in their thoughts when the Shelley Winters project came along.

They had a story outline by one of their favorite writers, Jimmy Sangster, who had also written many of the "Hammer Horror" films in England. *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* was to be a variation of the Brothers Grimm fairytale "Hansel and Gretel," about a kindly woman who entertains children from an orphanage and unwittingly becomes, in the eyes of the two children, the witch from the fairytale. I began immediately to embellish and change the story along lines that I felt more promising. Nicholson and Arkoff hired a conventional Hollywood hack named Robert Blees to write the screenplay. I did my best to get him to incorporate my ideas, but his imagination was limited, to say the least. I finally managed to get them to engage my friend Gavin Lambert to bring the script

closer to my vision. This is the version I set off to London with.

Shelley and I took the same flight from Los Angeles, and it was my first experience arriving at the airport in the company of a star. We were rushed by paparazzi and tabloid journalists. A limousine was waiting for us, and we were trundled off to London in high style — Shelley to the Hilton, and me to my friends, the Nobles. I had grown close to Peter and Marianne while living in Europe in the 1950s, and they provided me with a home away from home whenever I happened to be in London. Amazingly, one of their other close American friends was Shelley, whom they had known even before I did. When Shelley and I met in Hollywood, there was an extra rapport when we found we had the Nobles in common. Peter was a treasure trove of showbiz lowdown and important introductions, and he was invaluable in providing me with publicity when I needed it. Besides, he was a sweetheart, one of the kindest and most lively people I have ever known. His wife, Marianne, was his perfect complement as were their two adorable daughters, Tina and Kara. I was truly blessed to count them among my best friends.

The line producer on *Auntie Roo* was Louis M. “Deke” Hayward, the head of the AIP London office. He was an attractive, charming man, which surprised me because I expected the usual ogre. We immediately began discussing casting the smaller parts in the film. I knew we would be working with a limited budget, so for the important role of the phony medium, I suggested a lesser-known British character actor. But when I suggested him to Deke, he said, “Why don’t we try to get Ralph Richardson for the role?” I never dreamed that such a thing would be a possibility. I was thrilled. But would he accept? Three days later, I had my answer. Yes, he would. Other character actors whom I had admired from British films accepted too. Hugh Griffith would play the meat delivery man, and Rosalie Crutchley would play the mistress of the orphanage.

For the role of the female doctor in the infirmary, I had several actresses read for me and chose Pat Heywood. She had a maternal warmth that I felt appropriate. It was only when the film was finished that I discovered that, from a British point of view, she was miscast. It was pointed out to me that in the

early twenties, when our story took place, a female doctor in England could only have been from the upper classes. Pat Heywood had a middle-class accent! It was quite, quite, wrong and a lesson in the British class system. With Lionel Jeffries as the Police Inspector, whom I remembered vividly as Lord Queensbury in *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, Judy Cornwell as the maid, and Michael Gothard as the manservant, our casting was complete. Gothard was the only bit of casting imposed on me by my producers. I thought he was a lousy actor, and he had long hair which he peevishly objected to being cut for the film. I thought he was a pain in the ass.

The film was to be shot at Shepperton Studios outside of London, and it was arranged for a car to drive me to and from London each day. I declined this offer and chose instead to move into a small inn in the nearby village of Shepperton-on-Thames, right next to the river, as its name would suggest. Liz Taylor and Richard Burton had just finished shooting *Under Milk Wood* at Shepperton when I arrived. The proprietress at the inn had been preparing special food for them, and so I became the lucky recipient of the same wonderful homemade meals they had been given. Each night I would go down from my room to dine in the pub and was more often than not invited to join a table filled with other visitors and guests. I loved the conviviality of it — an immediate acceptance among strangers that I had never experienced in my own country. The typical sleazy neighborhood bar in America is a far cry from the comfortable and welcoming warmth of a British pub. Shelley thought she'd follow my example and moved into the hotel for all of two days, but then she announced that she'd caught "Shepperton catarrh" and high-tailed it back to the London Hilton, where she could be certain to be comfortable. She was brought to the studio every day in a limousine.

Again, the choice of cameraman would be crucial, as he is one of the most important contributors to the effectiveness of any film. Unfortunately, Desmond Dickinson was imposed on me by AIP. He was very much an old-fashioned cameraman with a career going back to the silents. His only claim to distinction was that he had photographed Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*. Before shooting, I watched some of his work in color and found it lamentably mediocre. He tended to use essentially

flat lighting and let the colors produce the contrasts. This was completely counter to my preference. I wanted the film to be photographed using values of light and shade that were produced purely by light, not color. The colors should be incidental. I knew I was faced with a real battle if I refused to use him, and with our production date looming, I met with Dickinson and told him frankly of my misgivings. This didn't seem to faze him, and he assured me that he could give me what I wanted. In the end, he probably did better work than he had done for some time, but I was never happy with it. A good example is the opening pan shot of the dolls in the secret nursery. While it ought to be multishadowed and mysterious, it is so flatly lit that the interest of the image lies solely in its content: the different faces and costumes of the dolls.

Having been through such hell with Shelley over the costumes in *What's the Matter with Helen?*, I feared the worst when it came to her clothes in *Auntie Roo*. The budget on this film precluded the use of a designer, so the whole wardrobe, including Shelley's costumes, was chosen from stock at Berman's in London. Bridget Sellers, our costume mistress, was very experienced and quickly found things that Shelley liked. To my surprise, the period costuming for the whole film came together very easily.

When we got on the set, I was psychologically prepared to go through the horrors of the screeching phonograph while Shelley "prepared" to act, but none was to be found. Had Shelley forgotten it in Los Angeles? No, she had not forgotten it, and it apparently wasn't there because she didn't need it. I did not know to what I should attribute this change in behavior. It may have simply been that she now was the solo star of the film. It was all hers, and props were no longer needed. She seemed to have no difficulty at all in throwing herself into the most dramatic of scenes entirely unaided by Puccini.

I was absolutely thrilled to be working with one of the world's greatest actors, Ralph Richardson, who arrived for work every day from London on a motorcycle. At first, I was apprehensive and intimidated, but I needn't have been. He was funny and charming and a total delight. He is the only actor I have ever worked with who, no matter how closely I watched

him during a take, revealed things I had not noticed when I saw the scene being repeated again in dailies. He brought such a rich interior life to every moment of his acting that even the most simple moments were charged and complex.

Shelley was in absolute awe of Sir Ralph. She told me that she tended to forget her lines when she was in a scene with him, because she could hardly believe that she was actually working with such a great actor. Her humility with him was very touching. Although we had no costume problems, we did have a left side/right side problem. I did not recall Shelley mentioning a side preference when we were shooting *Helen*, but now she suddenly announced that her left side must be favored. In one scene where she was supposed to be looking left at the person with whom she was conversing, she delivered her lines gazing unaccountably into the space on her left. Her lines became a soliloquy delivered toward a void, rather than replies in a conversation. She was not, however, to be dissuaded from this peculiar line reading.

On another occasion, when she was rehearsing a scene in which she disinters the mummified body of her dead daughter from its coffin, she suddenly walked off the set and refused to return. She had done this on *Helen* when she objected to Debbie making the crew laugh with her jokes and antics, but this time there was no Debbie and no laughter. I couldn't imagine what had happened. The assistant informed me that Shelley had gone to her dressing room in the main Shepperton building, quite some distance on the lot from where we were shooting. I got on my bicycle and rode there as fast as I could, bearing in mind that every moment lost from our shooting schedule was lost forever. I discovered her in her dressing gown brushing out her hair. Before even discussing the problem, I knew that it would take at least two hours to redo her hair and get her back into her costume and makeup ready to shoot.

"What is it, Shelley? What's the matter?" I asked.

"I can't do this scene. Bridget mentioned my daughter when we were rehearsing. She did it on purpose."

Bridget was the wardrobe mistress who had been so successful in choosing Shelley's costumes. I was certain that she wouldn't intentionally have done anything to upset Shelley. But now Shelley implied that she could only think of the scene in

terms of her own daughter being dead. An emotional connection had been made that would be hard to undo.

“Shelley, it’s only a scene in a movie. It has nothing to do with your daughter.”

I had no strong, easy answer. I just had to coax, cajole, and ease her back into doing the scene. It took a while, but I finally managed to get her to agree to come back on the set, with the understanding that Bridget would no longer be around. Bridget’s assistant took over and put Shelley back together, and we finally shot the scene. Shelley did it superbly, with perhaps the thought of her own daughter contributing to the sense of loss and horror she conveyed as the girl’s mummified body crumbles in her hands.

Directing children is a whole special branch of the director’s art. If a child is not especially self-conscious, he is easily turned into an actor because his imagination is alive and fresh and can be a director’s fool. Mark Lester was already an experienced actor and star because of his success as the eponymous character in *Oliver!*, the musical based on Charles Dickens’s novel *Oliver Twist*. Mark was pushed too much by his parents. He didn’t really want to be an actor, and he would much rather have been playing games at school. Hence, his acting tended to be minimal and perfunctory. I discovered that I could get a better performance from him by telling him, moment by moment, *what to think* in a scene. By doing this, he suddenly came alive on the screen. But he could not achieve this interior life on his own, mainly because he had no interest in doing it, as is so often the case with child actors.

Chloe Franks, who played his younger sister, seemed to enjoy performing, and it was a pleasure to work with her. I was amused one day when I was trying to get her to wax nostalgic over a teddy bear that might have been hers in a previous life. Her line was, “I used to have one like this a long time ago.” I wanted her to emphasize, with a far-off look in her eyes, “a long time ago.” But, not understanding the idea of reincarnation, she suddenly stopped and looked at me disdainfully. “It can’t be *that* long ago,” she said. “I’m only seven years old!”

The final script for *Auntie Roo* had been cobbled together rather carelessly from bits and pieces from various writers and



drafts. This left quite a continuity problem that had to be sorted out by our script girl. This kind of thing can especially affect costuming decisions. Since a film is shot out of sequence, one must know with certitude that when a character goes out of a room in one costume and three weeks later enters the next room, he or she is wearing the same costume. We were caught in this particular dilemma just once when we had already shot Shelley entering a hallway wearing a dress and now suddenly discovered, weeks later, that we had shot the entire scene before it with her wearing a cape over the dress. This would mean that she would be seen going through the door wearing a cape and coming through it on the other side without it. I had no idea what to do, when Shelley announced that she would take care of the problem. I wondered what she meant. I found out a moment later when, just before going through the door, in what seemed like a moment of desperation and anxiety, she abruptly tore the cape from her shoulders, tossed it on the ground, then proceeded through the door. As yet, I have never heard anyone question this curious bit of unmotivated bravura.

Auntie Roo is a retired soubrette, and in the film Shelley entertains the children from the orphanage with a song from her old music hall days. This, however, was a compromise insisted upon by Sam Arkoff, our guardian of the purse, from his lair in Hollywood. I had wanted instead to have a small traveling theatrical company performing scenes from a pantomime for the children, but Sam was not about to incur the extra expense that little flight of the director's fancy would entail. So Shelley squeezed into an appropriate music hall costume and charmingly sang "Tit Willow" from the fertile pens of Gilbert and Sullivan. It was Sam, also, who insisted that the film should be titled bluntly, *Who Slew Auntie Roo?* while I demanded the more euphonious and fairytale-like *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* Fortunately, my title ended up on the film itself, so the name the film is known by in the United States is actually a misnomer.

While at Shepperton, I was lucky enough to frequently lunch with Roman Polanski and his right hand, Hercules Bellville. Roman was shooting his version of *Macbeth* on the lot at the same time. One day, when I complained about my producers, he told me about the difficulties he had had with his producers

in Communist Poland when he made *Knife in the Water*. This was his way of reassuring me that all producers are the same, and they are always every director's cross to bear.

As it turned out, *Auntie Roo* had more appeal for children than adults. Yet it was given a PG rating by the masters of wisdom hired by the MPAA, thus discouraging parents from letting their grade-school children see it alone. A mother who took her seven- and nine-year-olds to see it told me that they absolutely adored it. And well, they should, because it offers them complete identification with their own kind, in the persons of Mark Lester and Chloe Franks, and tells a story in which the children outsmart the adults.

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With this English encounter behind me, my erstwhile partner George Edwards came to me with a television movie, another one of Henry Farrell's mystery thrillers called *How Awful About Allan*. He wanted me to direct it. It was about a young man who has hysterical blindness and is driven to extremes of fear and paranoia. It was the perfect part for that master of neurotic behavior, Tony Perkins. He accepted the role, and it became his first venture into television. The rest of the cast consisted of Julie Harris, who played Tony's sister, Joan Hackett as his girlfriend, and Kent Smith, whom I could not forget as Simone Simon's husband in *Cat People*. George produced the film under the banner of Aaron Spelling Productions, my first association with a company that was to become an important one in my future career.

Tony came directly from shooting Mike Nichols's *Catch-22*, a huge and expensive production. This made me concerned that Tony might not be able to accommodate himself to the tight shooting schedule of a TV movie. The first day we met on the old RKO lot where we were shooting, I told him about my fears. He assured me that he would be okay with the schedule. As it turned out, he was such a fine professional in his craft, I need not have worried. He always knew his lines and was always on time. To help him achieve his behavior as a blind person, he had opaque contact lenses made and wore them whenever he performed. He had to be led onto the set by his

assistant. In this way, he avoided any false note that might have been the result of inadequate rehearsal.

Julie Harris was a marvel of an actress and an angel as a person. It was a huge pleasure to work with her. Her concentration as an actress on one occasion, however, led to a disastrous incident. She was doing a driving scene in a car with a camera mounted on the side of the door when she suddenly veered and smashed the camera into a parked car. It happened so quickly that no one could stop it. She sheepishly explained that she simply hadn't noticed the camera was there.

I had already filmed a fire scene in *Auntie Roo*—the scene at the end in which Shelley Winters is ostensibly engulfed in flames. Shelley had insisted a double be used. In *Allan*, Kent Smith was to be caught in a burning room, and he bravely did the scene himself. I was fascinated by the way the special effects men smeared the walls with rubber glue, which is highly flammable but easily extinguished. The set was designed so that as the flames seem to engulf him, Kent could fall to his knees and crawl out the bottom of the set. It looked so real that I was terrified that something had gone wrong during filming. But Kent emerged from the flames, smiling and unsinged.

This television experience was a relatively painless and even enjoyable one. I thought I was only killing time and making a few bucks between real film work. If only I had known.

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I wasn't sure what was next. It was the early seventies, and even though I had many ideas and projects I wished to do, nothing yet had taken shape. Every director worth his salt, and even some worth very little, have a few pet projects they try to nurture and hustle to get off the ground. It would be impossible to count the days and months and indeed years that I spent developing and pushing projects that went nowhere. *Cadaver!* was a project that took several forms over the years. Its first incarnation was the horror script that was to be George Edwards's and my first film at Universal. It was based on an obscure little book called *Deliver Me from Eva* by Paul Bailey, which Forry Ackerman had brought to our attention. Over the years, it changed titles and became *Cranium* ; it changed agents

and casts and financing. This constant juggling act of cast and financing went on for over a decade, and we never got it made.

Another of my great unrequited passions was to bring Iris Murdoch's captivating novel *The Unicorn* to the screen. The story is a kind of modern fairytale in which a beautiful woman is kept prisoner in a castle. I thought of it as a postmodern *Rebecca*, filled with mystery and atmosphere, foggy moors and surprising character revelations. My quest to make this film led me on a merry international chase. Although the novel takes place in Scotland, suitable ambience of setting could be found both in Ireland and Brittany, France. To find backing for the film, I first went to Ireland where I was friendly with John Boorman and his formidable German wife, Christel. John liked my script and tried to help me set up the film at Ardmore Studios outside of Dublin. Stanley Kubrick had recently shot some scenes there for *Barry Lyndon*, and while touring the soundstages, the manager told me that Kubrick had them build a particularly elaborate and grandiose set. Then at the last minute, he had the whole thing torn down because he had discovered a real location that he preferred. I was, of course, insanely jealous to know that a director could be so admired by the moguls that they would allow him to get away with such extravagance.

Boorman, who was well-established internationally and greatly admired in his native Ireland, was the perfect person to open Irish doors for me. Christel was also very much on my side. One of the character reversals intended to surprise the audience in the course of the film was when the most dashing and masculine character in the story turns out to be homosexual. To make doubly certain that the revelation would come as a surprise, I sought a super macho actor to play the part.

I decided to try to interest Sean Connery in the role, but how to get the script to him? I didn't yet have the financing in place, so I couldn't follow the usual channel through his agent. I mentioned my problem to Christel. She knew Connery because John had made the film *Zardoz* in which Connery starred. I will never forget what she said: "Curtis, artists must speak to each other. You call him directly. I will give his number." Connery happened to be in Spain at the time, and the

next thing I knew, I was chatting away with him. He was very kind, asked me to send him the script, and said he would read it. A few days later, we were on the phone again. In the gentlest possible way, he turned me down, though he had been intrigued by the role. I knew it was a long shot, but at least I got to talk to Sean Connery.

Years went by, and I had meetings with many wonderful actresses including Charlotte Rampling and Catherine Deneuve, who each expressed interest, but the timing was never right. Financing would be pulled at the last minute, or an actress who had made a promise would back out. It was a never-ending battle that I lost. Sadly, every director I know has at least a dozen of these stories.

Perhaps my greatest heartbreak came in the form of *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*. I had long hoped and planned to make a film based on the Borden case — the gruesome and enigmatic true story of a spinster who was accused of killing her father and stepmother with an ax in the late 1800s. She was acquitted of the killings, but no other suspects were ever charged, and she was later suspected of being a lesbian. I developed the script and brought it to ABC as a Movie of the Week. It was agreed I would direct, and I signed a contract. I got so far as to meet with the production staff and work on script revisions with producer George LeMaire.

Unfortunately, I was filming another TV movie at the exact same time they wanted to begin filming the Borden project. Though the start and end dates were only four days apart, and I had offered to film at night during my off time from the other project, LeMaire took me off the picture. They would not budge on the schedule, due to what they called the “constrictions of television.” I always suspected other motives, for as soon as Elizabeth Montgomery was attached to the project, I was let go as director. I believe the producer conspired to use a technicality of “unavailability” to breach the contract that had already been made. My suspicions are that they wanted to do the production on the cheap or that the politics of actors and agents played a part. I brought arbitration against them with the Directors Guild and won. But the destruction of a man’s creative work is a terrible thing, and Mr. LaMaire might as well have taken a knife and cut out my heart.

With these losses in the background, George Edwards and I managed to get another feature project going. George had been developing a new script with a writer friend of his, Tony Crechales, called *Are You a Good Boy?* It was a story about a young serial murderer set in the milieu of American middle-class life. It dealt with the psychology of such a person, stemming from his relationship with an overly possessive mother. I added some atmospheric touches based on my former landlady Mabel Evans, who owned the Hollywood rooming house I lived in during college, and her neurotic son, who played out his real-life frustrations on a broken-down piano in the living room. In this case, George found private financing for the film—now called *The Killing Kind*—from a couple of Texas businessmen who fancied extending their activities into the film business.

We found a wonderful, big old barn of a house in the Hancock Park section of Los Angeles where we could shoot both interiors and exteriors. It met all the requirements of the script, such as having a swimming pool, and also offered a visual dividend in the form of staircase funicular to help the elderly get up and down between floors. To play the tenants of the rooming house, seen from time to time in the background, we brought over a small group of elderly ladies each day from a nearby retirement home. Appearing in a movie brought some excitement into their monotonous lives.

To prepare for making *The Killing Kind*, I read several books on the psychology of murderers, particularly serial killers of women. I discovered that their basic psychology involves a deep hatred of their mothers — a hatred that stems from the mother's behavior when she punishes that child by withdrawing her love. How many mothers may say, "You've been a bad boy, and Mother doesn't love you anymore." This seems perfectly innocent to the mother as a way of letting her child know that he displeases her, but to the male child, this is deeply frustrating and can lead, in extreme cases, to the serial murders of women. In effect, the child is killing his mother over and over again out of frustration over his rejected love.

George had the felicitous idea of trying to get Ann Sothern to

play the mother. After we had a meeting with her at her house, she agreed to do the part. Now we had to find someone new to play her son, and a great many up-and-coming young actors in town came in to read for the role. I was unhappy with all of them — until John Savage showed up. At this point, he had only appeared in *Bad Company*, a western directed by Robert Benton. He gave such a remarkable reading that I began to tremble. I knew that he was the perfect actor for the part. I trembled because I was instantly seized with the fear that we might not be able to make a deal with his agents. It was a kind of buck fever that overcame me. As it turned out, the negotiations were not easy, because his agents and managers knew they had a potential star on their hands, but it was a good part, John wanted to play it, and we finally made a deal.

George knew Cindy Williams, who had just appeared in George Cukor's *Travels With My Aunt*, and brought her in to meet me. She was perfect for the part of the key murder victim in the story, and fortunately, we were able to make a deal for her services. Two veterans from my first movie, *Night Tide*, also appeared in the film: Luana Anders played a spinster neighbor who becomes suspicious of the activities in the house next door, and Marjorie Eaton played a key role as one of the elderly roomers. Marjorie had remained a good friend of mine, and I was happy to be working with her again.

At the time, Ann Sothorn was best known to the public as the star of the popular TV series *Private Secretary* and *My Mother the Car*. Before that, she had been a star at MGM, and she brought the old star syndrome to our set. She was demanding and certainly no angel. She still had the pretty Ann Sothorn face, but she had put on a great deal of weight over the years and was, like Shelley Winters, self-conscious about it. But the additional weight fit the role she was playing — that of a former nightclub hostess who now lived an indolent and self-indulgent life as the owner of a rooming house for the elderly, a house that had been willed to her by one of her many lovers.

John was a wonderfully inventive young actor, and Ann was all too aware of the impact he was making. John looked to her for support and encouragement as an older and more experienced actress, but she did not give it to him. She was jealous, and she began using the old tricks that actors will

resort to when they are trying to upstage another actor. I did whatever I could to mitigate the situation, but it came to a climax when I was filming a highly dramatic scene in which he denounces his mother as a “big, fat whore.” First, Ann wanted the word “fat” taken out of his speech. I dealt with this by seeming to give in to her request. I told John to do one take without the hated word, knowing that I already had an original version that I would use in the editing room. As long as the camera was on Ann, all went smoothly, but the moment we began to do the reverse angles on John, things went awry. Suddenly Ann came up with a series of complaints, ending with an accusation that I was ignoring an important moment she had to play. I faced up to her. I said, “The camera is here, you are there. Play your moment.” She finally stopped her little tricks, and John finished his part of the scene without further incident. She had hoped to throw him off balance and hurt his performance. John and I were both left dismayed by her petty and mean-spirited behavior toward a vulnerable young actor.

During the editing of *The Killing Kind*, I experienced the kind of arbitrary and destructive meddling that producers so often engage in in an apparent effort to show their power. I had filmed a very important four-minute scene in which John Savage goes to the zoo and watches the apes behind bars, which reminds him of his own recent incarceration. In his mind, he hears the echoes of laughter and looks off to see the girl who had accused him of rape standing with her boyfriend and looking at animals in a nearby cage. It was one of those purely visual moments that wordlessly expressed a great deal. It set up the following scene in which John telephones her. Without it, the fact that he suddenly calls the girl seems arbitrary, a plot manipulation of the writer. It was an important moment in the story, but the producers insisted on cutting it because it wasn’t “essential” to the plot and besides, what the hell, they showed me who was boss. The effectiveness of the film was diminished by this omission, and I foolishly hadn’t saved the footage so that it could perhaps be inserted at some future date. Had I known, I would have stolen the footage and taken it home, even if it was only the work print.

Nevertheless, the film turned out well, and some of my critics have called it my best film. At the premiere in Los Angeles, I



was amused to see Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy running down the aisle as the lights dimmed. Yet *The Killing Kind* suffered a sad fate. The Texas financiers, in their anxiety to get their money back, gave the distribution rights to the film to a fast-talking slicker who had a small commercials company. This was like giving the film to my grandmother to distribute. We did get him to show it to Universal, but they turned it down, and it ended up being distributed by him anyway. He got it a few dates in some drive-ins in the South, and then he ran out of money. Sam Fuller, one of my champions, tried to help me get it properly distributed, but when they heard about what had happened in the South, they lost interest. Once a film has been partially distributed, it is very difficult to find anyone legitimate who will take it over. The bloom is off. The film was doomed. *C'est vraiment un film maudit.*

As for the rest of the cast—Ann Sothern, John Savage, Cindy Williams, and I — we are all proud of the film, however cursed it may be. Ann Sothern particularly, after all the trouble she gave me on the set, took great pride in her performance and made a personal appearance with it at the Santa Barbara Film Festival. It may indeed offer her finest work as an actress. In the end, no film is ever truly dead. As long as there is a projectable copy, the film can be shown at a festival as a “find” or in a video incarnation, even if it has never had exposure on the big screens of the world.

## The Slippery Slope

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I soon had a call from my agent, Bob Bookman, but this time it wasn't for a feature film; it was for a television movie. I was now officially on the beginning of my slide down a slippery slope. The jump downward from feature filmmaking to any form of television work is a long one, and the first step is the television movie. It is just like a feature film, only without the star power, without the budget, and most often with an inferior script that has not been tailored to bring out the best of its intrinsic merits, but rather to please TV executives whose mind-set is influenced by the demands of advertisers. It is quite a different mind-set from that of movie executives.

I found out just how different on a television movie called *The Cat Creature*. The script was written by Robert Bloch, based on an old story he'd published in *Weird Tales*. In fact, he was one of the horror writers I had discovered in the pages of *Weird Tales* during my teen years in Beaumont. It was a nice pulpy story about a girl who is the reincarnation of an ancient Egyptian cat goddess. In casting the actress to play the modern incarnation of this beautiful goddess, I got my first nasty taste of TV executive thinking. I discovered that this new set of black suits was always very involved in the casting of leading roles in the network TV drama. Unlike movie executives whose primary interest was "box-office appeal," they were concerned with something they called "TVQ." This meant the ratings the star's other television appearances had received. The connection between a star's suitability for a role meant absolutely nothing, and in the case of *The Cat Creature*, I was slapped in the face with an especially egregious example of it. For the role of a beautiful, dark, exotic, sexually alluring girl, they suggested Patty Duke. I could hardly believe my ears. She was a short, dwarfish, unsexy and unattractive character actress — and they

were serious!

At least my wonderful young agent had the foresight to put me together with Douglas Cramer on this project. Douglas and I would work together off and on for the next two decades, and he was a sympathetic, intelligent producer in a sea of detritus. Douglas explained to me that Patty Duke had appeared the month before in a show that got a high rating; ergo, she was perfect for the part. However much I respected Miss Duke's abilities as an actress, I knew that the idea of her in this role was ludicrous and that my most dazzling cinematic sleight of hand as a director would be unable to disguise that fact. I begged Cramer to entreat them to accept someone else. He did, persuading them somehow that Miss Duke might be a bit too far off the mark for the role. They came back with Meredith Baxter, an actress who was popular at portraying ordinary middle-class American girls, and whom Doug had worked with on *Bridget Loves Bernie*. She was blond and blue-eyed and was at least reasonably pretty. I recalled that Egyptian women supposedly used henna to dye their black hair red, so we put a dark red wig on Meredith, and she agreed to darken her eyes with green contact lenses. This was as far as I could go in transforming her into a Mediterranean beauty, but at least it made her reasonably appropriate for the role.

Bloch had written an important supporting role, the proprietor of a magic shop, for a man. I suggested that he rewrite the role for a woman and that we try to get Gale Sondergaard for the part. Sondergaard was an actress I remembered vividly from my childhood. She had been memorable as the sinister Oriental woman in *The Letter* and in the title role of *The Spider Woman*, a Basil Rathbone/Sherlock Holmes adventure. In 1937, she had received an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress in *Anthony Adverse*, and was, in fact, the first to receive the award for the newly minted Supporting Actress category. In the 1930s, the Academy had not yet started to award statuettes in every category and later gave them out retrospectively. While we were shooting *The Cat Creature*, a special press event took place on our set to give Miss Sondergaard her long-overdue statuette. Her career had been brought to a halt in the 1940s due to her unflinching left-wing political beliefs, but by the 1970s, the people who had

been blacklisted were just beginning to work again. It seemed ironic that Charlton Heston, so far to the right politically, was chosen to present the award.

I had wanted the proprietress of the occult shop to be played as a lesbian to lend a bit of spice to the show, but Standards and Practices, the office of the network devoted to removing any element in a script that might offend Mrs. Grundy, sent a memo after that there must be “NO SUGGESTION WHATSOEVER THAT THIS CHARACTER IS A LESBIAN.” However, my natural propensity toward subversion was given its due when Doug Cramer allowed me to add a dwarf hooker to a scene in a cheap hotel where Stuart Whitman, as the detective, interviews John Carradine, who plays the hotel clerk. The dwarf lady of the evening is shown seated on the counter in the hotel lobby. Swinging her short legs and batting her eyelashes, she says to Stuart, “How’s tricks, baby?” This was left in, and Cramer was very pleased when the incident was singled out for comment in a *New York Times* review of the show. It wasn’t the sort of thing they were used to seeing in the bland medium of television.

On the many TV shows I was to direct in the future, I became aware of the incredible lengths the executives and producers will go to preserve the blandness and uniformity of their product. Advertisers did not want a disturbed audience. They did not want a thinking audience. They appealed to a zombie-like mass of middle- and lower-class Americans who accepted the conventional pap fed them without a murmur. Of course, this was aided and abetted by the political right wing in this country who need uneducated and unthinking masses to stay in office.

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Bob Bookman next sent me a script called *The Bees* that two new young producers, Ron Bernstein and Howard Rosenman, were going to make as another ABC Movie of the Week. The ABC executive in charge was Barry Diller (who later became an even more powerful presence in Hollywood). As usual, it was the executive Diller who had to approve the primary casting, and he wanted Bette Davis in the role of the matriarch of a

wine-producing family in Napa Valley who has a mysterious power over the bees in their vineyards.

One day after the script had been sent to Ms. Davis, I was in the production office when the phone rang. One of the staff picked up the phone, and after listening to the voice said, “It’s Bette Davis — and I think she wants to talk to you.”

I took the receiver. “Hello . . . ,” I began to say, but was immediately cut off.

Without a word of greeting, Ms. Davis said, “I’m absolutely terrified! I’d love to do it, but my doctor won’t let me. I’m allergic to bee stings. If anything goes wrong, well, it could kill me. I go into anaphylactic shock if I’m stung.”

I expressed my regret and disappointment that she wouldn’t be doing the part, and she hung up.

Secretly, I was not unhappy that Bette had turned down the role. Of course, I would have been thrilled and excited to work with the legendary actress, but she had been in a number of TV movies lately. The next name on our list was Gloria Swanson. Gloria had hardly been seen on screen since *Sunset Blvd.*, so I was absolutely delighted when she accepted the role. The moment I received word that she would be playing the part, I called my friend Robert Balzer to let him know about it. Balzer was the wine critic for the *Los Angeles Times* and the scion of an old distinguished Los Angeles family — a celebrity in his own right. He had often mentioned his longtime friendship with Gloria Swanson, so I wanted him to tell me all about her. He explained that she was very honest, very unpretentious, and a delight to know. Besides being one of the most legendary of all movie stars, she was a health food fanatic, and this was something I was sympathetic to. Bob was sure I would like her very much and that we would be simpatico.

The producers decided to shoot the entire film on location in the Napa Valley Wine Country. For the family’s house in the film, we used a beautiful Victorian mansion that was the private residence of a small wine producer’s family (a property that was later bought by Francis Coppola where he opened his own winery). We engaged a good cameraman named Jack Woolf for the all-important task of photographing our diva. The cast was rounded out with Kate Jackson and Edward Albert. Robert Balzer wanted to visit us while we were shooting and

asked if there might be a small part for him. I was astonished. "But you're not an actor!" I said.

"Oh, yes I am," he replied. "I graduated from RADA [the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts] in London." So I gave him the role of the minister who presides over Swanson's funeral in the film.

People have often wondered how we were able to have so many living bees on Swanson's body without endangering her. Originally, we had planned to use drones, the male bees without stingers. But we discovered that we would be shooting in the wrong season, and none were available. We had to use ordinary worker bees with their deadly stingers. Our bee wrangler (in the movie business, anyone who works with animals is called a "wrangler") came up with a clever idea. He placed the bees in a box containing dry ice, which put them to sleep, and hired a group of workers to take each bee, one by one, squeeze it slightly to force it to extrude its stinger, and chop off its stinger with a doctor's scalpel. If the stinger were pulled out, the bee would die. In this way, the danger was removed and the bee lived to perform its role in the film.

Gloria Swanson had informed the producers that she expected to be addressed by members of the crew, including the director, as "Miss Swanson." This brought an aura of consideration and courtesy to the set that represented an already vanished tradition of politeness and gentility. At one point, Robert Balzer told me that Gloria mentioned how much she enjoyed working with me. I began to puff with pride, when he added, "It's because you brought your juicer along." We health food nuts are birds of a feather, and we recognized and admired each other as such. Perhaps because of her commitment to the natural order of things, as evidenced by her support for the health food movement, Gloria showed only love and acceptance toward the bees as we poured them on her skin. Kate Jackson, on the other hand, shuddered and was repelled by them. Since we were shooting some of the scenes on an open porch, there was always the chance that a "hot" bee might get mixed up with the prepared ones.

Joel Schumacher, who later became a well-known Hollywood director of meretricious films, was given the job of costume designer by Barry Diller, who was a close friend of his.

Joel had an aura of kindness that masked an iron will bent on turning everything his way. He managed to flatter Miss Swanson in his choice of clothes for her, but he put a hideous Mexican sweater on Kate that she wore virtually throughout the entire film. When I asked him to change this sweater for a flowing dressing gown that would have been more suitable to the fantastic climax of the film, his mask of kindness dropped away, and he bluntly refused my request, supported in his stubbornness by his doting producer. The bulky and unattractive sweater remains a major visual irritant in those final scenes.

David Shire's haunting score for *Killer Bees* contributed greatly to the film's overall effect. The climactic scene in the attic of the house, filled with bees and their honeycombs, is beautifully brought to life by the music, echoing the work of one of my favorite composers, the Russian mystic Alexander Scriabin. David made his musical choices without any prompting from me, but his intuitive response was a realization of my dreams.

The day after we finished shooting, I rang up Gloria in her room to say goodbye. "Hello, Miss Swanson," I said. "It's Gloria to you," she replied. I had passed muster and was now her friend. Although I was unable to see her often because she lived in New York, we remained friends until her death some years later. She kept in touch with me by telephoning quite often. It was always wonderful to hear that inimitable, girlish voice. The voice that most people identify with her — the voice of Norma Desmond in *Sunset Blvd.* — was not her natural voice at all. She told me that most people meeting her expected Norma Desmond, a character very far from the real Gloria Swanson, a woman who had her feet on the ground and her head firmly and intelligently on her shoulders. Her autobiography, *Swanson on Swanson*, is the most revealing account I have ever read of Hollywood during the era of silent pictures. It is written with a frankness and honesty that gives a true portrait of its author's personality.

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Not too long after *Killer Bees* was completed, Doug Cramer

offered me another Robert Bloch story from the pages of *Weird Tales* to direct. *The Dead Don't Die* was about zombies and took place during the depths of the depression. I was once more back in the period territory of *What's the Matter with Helen?*, and I loved it. I was again able to oversee the set decoration and spot a mistake in period detail in time to have it rectified. In one scene that took place in a restaurant, the set decorator had filled the set with tables and chairs that were too contemporary in style. I went out on the backlot and found some old café booths that created a perfect period atmosphere for the scene.

I had great fun staging the scenes of marathon dancing that echoed those of the exhausted marathon dancers in *They Shoot*

*Horses, Don't They?* Ray Milland played the owner of the dance hall, whom one eventually discovers is the evil, megalomaniac zombie master. The heroine was played by a lovely Argentinian actress named Linda Cristal, to whom I gave a Dolores del Rio hairstyle and dressed in stylish thirties clothes. George Hamilton was the bewildered young hero, and Joan Blondell played a shopkeeper. It seemed strange to be telling Joan that her hairstyle should be the same as she had had it in the musical *Dames* in 1934, when she was a major star.

I chose Reggie Nalder to play the zombie at the center of the film. Reggie's strange and pockmarked face limited him to playing such sinister roles. Both Hitchcock and Fellini had used him, so I was in good company. The network executives, with their usual lack of judgment, had someone else in mind who would have brought nothing to the part. Fortunately, Doug Cramer agreed with me, and he fought the executives and won. A remark that Reggie made to me one day made me feel sorry for him. He told me that he wished he could be cast in a conventional leading role sometime. Underneath his unfortunate face lurked a romantic spirit.

Ray Milland was well past his Academy Award-winning days, but I felt very privileged to work with such a distinguished actor. He was still very handsome and would have looked even more so if he had allowed us to put a toupee on him. But his attitude was that he should be accepted as he was, so he played the part entirely bald. He was open to



accepting whatever parts came his way at this point in his career. He told me that he had been talking to his friend James Stewart, who expressed envy at the fact that Ray was working and he was not. James Stewart was still the bigger star, and I doubt if anyone would have had the temerity to offer him a part in an ordinary television show.

In the climactic scene of the film, Ray Milland finally exposes the insane megalomania that has motivated his character. He gives an eloquent speech in which he reveals that with his army of zombies he plans to rule the world. I kept goading Ray to reveal more and more of his madness, to bring his speech to a truly frightening climax. Suddenly, he stopped in mid-speech and, drawing himself up disdainfully, said, "Curtis, you need to understand that I am *not* Vincent Price!"

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Whether I liked it or not, I was now well on my way down the slippery slope. I was forced to take on projects that I had neither the aesthetic vision for, nor the slightest intellectual interest in. It was a job and I needed the money. I was stuck in the role — or hole, rather — of television director. My final foray into the genre of television movies was a monstrosity called *Devil Dog: The Hound of Hell*.

The script was lousy and the producer, Jerome M. Zeitman, was determined to make the film within the budget he was given by the network. His only concern was to make the film for the cost of the licensing fee. You see, in the heyday of TV movies there was something called "deficit financing." A big company might pay a little more to make a movie with the idea that they would get it back in reruns and syndication. Zeitman was an independent producer and had given me an exceptionally tiny budget, even for television. The whole film built up to a horrendous climax, where the Devil Dog is revealed, but since the producer would not spend any money on effects, the scene fell flat. It was laughable rather than scary. Thank god I had nothing to do with the post-production work. I was off the picture by the time they created that ridiculous scene. Still, I enjoyed directing Yvette Mimieux, who was one of the most beautiful actresses I had ever worked with,

and Richard Crenna, who was a total pro. But the film was an embarrassing disaster. And the slippery slope only steepened.

I had had a few tastes of this world years earlier when my old friend Don Siegel offered me the opportunity to direct a couple episodes of *The Legend of Jesse James*, a half-hour TV series he produced in the days before the revival of his own directorial career. Later he would reignite his success with Clint Eastwood in the first Dirty Harry film. *Jesse James* starred Christopher Jones, a young James Dean look-alike who unquestionably had star quality. He was married at the time to Susan Strasberg, and she gave birth to their daughter while I was working on the series. I was able to cast a number of actors in guest roles whom I admired and who were friends of mine, including Sally Kellerman, Mariette Hartley, and Sondra Kerr (aka Mrs. Robert Blake). I even managed to get Timothy Carey onto the show.

Admittedly, I wasn't the most perfect director in terms of experience and interest to work on a western, but I did my best to prepare. In order to have a better understanding of the actors, I took a few acting classes with Robert Gist, a character actor who had been married to Agnes Moorehead. He taught me about the importance of subtext — how the lines that an actor delivers merely float on the surface, and that acting really has to do with the intentions *behind* the lines. I used this lesson in *Jesse James* when I gave Albert Salmi a suggestion of subtext for a scene. It was a textbook example of its kind. In the scene, Salmi, a farmer, has captured Jesse and holds him tied to a chair, awaiting the arrival of the sheriff. I proposed that he mark down in a little notebook how he will spend the reward money while he chats with his prisoner. It was a small thing, yet the kind of idea a director can give an actor that ultimately enhances and gives depth to his performance. Albert was delighted with it.

Kevin McCarthy played a guest role on one of the episodes I worked on. He had starred in Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and was the brother of the famous writer Mary McCarthy. He had a wicked sense of humor, which showed when an extra began talking in front of him about how much she disliked Mary McCarthy's books. He gave me a broad wink behind the extra's back, and I could hardly keep from cracking.

Kevin was also present when I caused a terrible gaffe that brought me a dressing down from Don Siegel. We were shooting a scene where Christopher has won a fight. He takes a prisoner and then stuffs a stocking into the actor's mouth as a gag. I waited for Christopher to tie a bandana around the actor's head to hold in the gag, but he didn't do it. I told him that I thought he should, and he balked. He said it wasn't necessary, that it would slow down the action too much. I kept arguing my point — an argument that was witnessed by a number of extras who looked like they'd been in a thousand and one westerns — but no one offered to take my side. I supposed that Christopher had already been in many episodes of the series and ought to know what he was doing, so I let it stand.

When the dailies were shown, there was a roar of fury from the projection room. Don said the scene was totally unacceptable, and it was my fault. We had to do it over and that cut fearsomely into the show's budget. I was in the doghouse for quite a while, but Don was a sweetheart and couldn't stay angry for long. The mystique of the western was hardly my bailiwick, but I enjoyed being around the rough atmosphere of horses and cowboys. As I recall, I was even tempted to raise a mustache and add a few appropriate items to my wardrobe. At the time, I believed it was only temporary. I would have more movie work soon and would never have to work on a TV series again.

My descent into the hell of episodic television truly began in the late seventies. It started with an episode of *Baretta*. I liked Robert Blake. Although he had a reputation for being difficult, we got along well. He had the usual chip on his shoulder of a short man. He was gentle and kind to the actresses who appeared on the program but mean and indifferent to the actors. As the star of a popular show, he was the absolute king in his own domain. He ruled — and let everyone know it. On one of the episodes I directed, his intimidation went to the extreme in the case of a particularly inexperienced actor. The young man came to me and said his legs were shaking so much that he wasn't sure he could get through the scene. I took him aside and did my best to reassure him by telling him to ignore Blake and concentrate on his job. Bobby noticed that I was

speaking to him and drew *me* aside and told me not to help the boy. Bobby enjoyed his little sadistic game and was not to be stopped.

To give Blake his due, he was one of the few people who would allow me to hire my favorite bogeyman, Timothy Carey, and so again I had the pleasure of working with this incorrigible madman. This time, Timothy got a bit too out of control and actually hurt a fellow actor in a scene where he was beating him up. He also did a number of improvisational riffs on his dialogue that I found utterly fascinating but which may not have been appreciated by the producers. As usual with Timothy, the network insisted on cutting many of these bits of eccentric behavior that made him such a unique and refreshing presence on the screen. How the network executives hated the unconventional and the unexpected, and how equally they loved their comfortable little groove of mediocrity!

I was next hired to direct an episode of *Tales of the Unexpected*, which was a sort of modern-day *Twilight Zone* with a more science-fiction bent. It was one of Quinn Martin's numerous television offerings, which included *The Fugitive*, *The Streets of San Francisco*, and *Barnaby Jones*. Quinn had sought me out specifically and contacted my agent. I was initially optimistic. When we met, he told me he'd actually studied my work, that I was wonderful and had a touch that was unique and perfect for the show. I told him that the first order of business was to get a strong actor for the lead in the episode. He said, "You're absolutely right, Curtis." Two days later, he called me into the office and said, "Well we've got our star!"

I said, "Really, who's it going to be?"

"Ricky Nelson."

Ricky Nelson could not act his way out a paper bag. And this was a very demanding role, if you can imagine. I filmed the episode as best I could in the style I had been given to believe was desired by the producer. It went downhill from there. In television, the Directors Guild has a specific contractual obligation that producers sign. It says that the first cut of a show must be supervised and approved by the director, and then the producer can go in and do whatever he wants to do. But as soon as I had finished shooting, the employees of Quinn Martin warned me, "Curtis, if you ever want to work for him

again, walk off the lot right now. Don't demand your rights; just walk off the lot."

I wasn't particularly eager to work with him again, but I walked. I wanted to work somewhere again, if not with him. I had shot a story that turned out in the end to be a dream. I included several Curtis Harrington touches, which I thought was what Quinn had hired me for. To my shock and amazement, he systematically cut out every Curtis Harrington touch in the show. Now it was as ordinary and unremarkable as possible. Why he had hired me, I'll never know.

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From there, I directed episodes of several short-lived series that are (and are best) forgotten. One that I am often asked about though, is *Charlie's Angels*. I was back in Aaron Spelling territory, though by now he reigned over a much larger kingdom than when I worked with him back in 1970 on *How Awful About Allan*. On my first episode of *Charlie's Angels* in 1978, I was confronted by a young production assistant who warned me to beware of Kate Jackson. I asked him what he meant, since I had worked with her on *Killer Bees* and had found her to be very sweet and open and we had gotten along well.

Clearly, something had happened in the meantime. The young man told me that these days she enjoyed chewing up and spitting out directors and that he felt obligated to warn me. He was reassured when I told him that I had worked with her before and didn't expect any problems. I was, however, given a clue about the "new" Kate Jackson when I learned that she had refused to accept the role assigned to her in this episode. The script had to be rewritten for Cheryl Ladd to play it, which was a nice opportunity for Ladd since she was new to the show. Farrah Fawcett had recently left but was nevertheless back on this episode to fulfill some aspect of her contract.

Everything went smoothly during the shoot until a moment came when I needed a full shot of the four girls. Kate entered from a crouching position and stood up too wide off her mark to fit in the shot. I told her where I needed her. She balked. She claimed that she couldn't get to where I wanted her from her

crouching position. Actually, it meant little more than shifting her weight as she stood up, but she flatly refused to do it. We began to argue and our voices rose. Finally, she shouted at me, “You want me to do this *for the camera?*”

I shouted back, even louder, “Yes, *for the camera!*”

Pouting, and filled with resentment, she finally placed herself in the position I wanted. Now I knew what the poor assistant had been talking about. At the wrap party, Kate and I got together over a drink, and I must say that she apologized for her behavior. I guess her popularity and stardom had gone to her head. Exit sweet, charming girl; enter demanding virago, the unfortunate result of star syndrome.

It has always been my custom to hire little people — midgets and dwarfs — whenever I can find a role for them. I managed to get Billy Barty cast as a newsboy in the episode, “Angel on My Mind.” Kate, who had been squeamish about the bees in *Killer Bees* was now, for no good reason, squeamish about working with a little person. But the other girls enjoyed it, and it added a little spice to an otherwise perfunctory scene.

I found Farrah Fawcett to be the most untalented actress of the bunch. Her performance, such as it was, had mainly to do with making sure that her hair remained fluffed up. She was in the habit of washing and blow-drying her hair several times during the shooting day. During one episode, I had waited quite a while for her to return to the set. I asked my assistant the reason for the delay. He said, “You hear that sound?” I listened and became aware of the distant buzz of a hair dryer. “When that stops,” he said, “she’ll be here.”

Aaron Spelling, the producer of *Charlie’s Angels*, was, like so many of his ilk, a ruthless man. He could be infinitely charming when he wished to be and deadly if you fell out of his favor. I experienced both sides of him. While shooting an episode of *Charlie’s Angels* in which the four girls appeared, a stunt girl was injured jumping out of a moving car. This caused a delay in shooting, and I fell behind schedule. Because of this, when my agent tried to find work for me on the same show the following year, Aaron Spelling had decreed that I was unacceptable. It made no difference to him that a stunt girl’s unfortunate injury was a legitimate reason for my going over schedule.

It's not by chance that Aaron Spelling is so successful, because he is, in a way, a kind of genius. I was endlessly astonished by the way he could make millions of dollars out of trivia. And he was intensely involved in every aspect and detail of his shows. We would be in a meeting about a current script, and he would come in and put his finger right on all the weaknesses, demanding us to, "Fix this, fix this, fix this." Then the next group would come in for another show, and he'd do the same thing. He had a mind like a steel trap.

\* \* \*

When I needed a job a year later, I went to see my old friend and producer Doug Cramer. By then, he had gone into partnership with Aaron and was personally producing *Dynasty*. The popularity of *Dynasty* was a worldwide phenomenon. In Germany, it was called *The Denver Clan*, in Italy the streets of Rome were empty on the nights *Dynasty* aired, and in England there were *Dynasty* parties all over the country. In America, it ran neck and neck in the ratings with *Dallas*. One week *Dynasty* would be number one, the next, *Dallas*. Perhaps by this time Aaron had forgotten his edict against me. In any case, Doug offered me the chance to direct one show. If I did it well, I would be offered more to do. Once again in my career, despite everything I had done, I was on trial.

Doug screened several representative episodes of *Dynasty* for me to acquaint me with the style of the show, and then he asked me to spend some time on the set of the currently shooting episode. While there, I ran into Joan Collins, an old acquaintance from my Fox days. "What are you doing here?" she immediately asked. I explained that I had been hired to direct the next show. I never particularly liked Joan Collins. She had a supercilious and arrogant air about her that irritated me. One could hardly say that she emanated warmth and kindness. However, as I began working with her, I discovered something that I did like about her. She was honest and direct — qualities that I very much admire in people who have them. I liked her even better after I read a paperback copy of her autobiography in which her honesty and directness really show through. Nevertheless, I never did grow to like her personally

and would never seek her company to have a casual chat, as I did with all the other players on the show.

My first “trial” came very quickly. I discovered that the procedure for preparing each show involved a “concept meeting.” This was a meeting around a large table that brought together all the key personnel involved in the making of the forthcoming episode. The script was gone over page by page, suggestions made and commandments given. Doug Cramer was personally involved in every minute detail, just like Aaron Spelling. He had decreed, for instance, that in any scene involving the serving or drinking of champagne, it had to be Cristal, so a large supply of dummy bottles of this particular and expensive brand were provided by the prop department. On this, the occasion of my first “concept meeting,” we reached a point in the script in which Alexis (Joan’s character) was in her apartment talking on the phone. But it wasn’t enough that she should be just “talking” on the phone. Mr. Cramer and every eye turned to me and asked, “What will she be *doing* while she’s talking on the phone?”

I had to think fast, on my feet, as it were. What, indeed, would she be doing while she was talking on the phone? “Well . . .” I improvised, “She . . . she . . . will be in her dressing gown, relaxing, and...”

“Yes? Yes?” Everyone at the table looked at me eagerly for the answer. It was an absolutely terrifying moment. It seemed that my whole career, such as it was, hung in the balance.

“She is home, relaxing in a dressing gown after a hard day’s work,” I continued. They liked that: costume department decision instantly made. I finished up with a flourish, “And she’ll be drinking a martini!”

A sigh of relief surged through the group.

“Wonderful!” someone said. “She’s *great* with olives!” Everybody nodded sagely. I was in. And I hadn’t even known about Miss Collins’s superb ability to manipulate olives. Later I did grow to appreciate the ease with which Joan Collins handled props. So many actresses fumble. They can’t manage to say a line and put on mascara at the same time. But with Joan, it’s a snap. “RADA,” she told me, “my RADA training, darling.” In the theatrical community of England, almost everyone is a graduate of RADA.



On one occasion, my contribution turned out to be much more than just directing an already written show. I received a script that dealt with the wedding trip of Blake and Krystle. In the script, the scene consisted mostly of the newlyweds sitting on their private plane on the way to South America, just talking. I told Doug that it was very boring, not at all what the *Dynasty* viewers would want to see. They should experience a glamorous wedding trip. The couples should arrive at a lavish resort hotel and have a romantic interlude after their return from a first night on the town. Doug loved my idea and immediately gave it to the staff writers to integrate into the script. I found myself directing the scenes I had envisioned: the arrival at the hotel, their cottage suite with its own private pool, and the late-night interlude in which they return in evening clothes and dance together before making love. It was surefire stuff for *Dynasty*.

Among the guest stars I directed were Rock Hudson and Helmut Berger. I directed one half of the infamous kiss that Rock gave to Linda Evans before he admitted that he had AIDS. I say one half because the kiss came at the end of one episode and started the next. This meant that I had to restage the kiss at the beginning of my episode. Rock was already beginning to show the ravages of the disease. He had lost weight and his face was lined. In one scene in which he was wearing an open collar, his neck looked so wrinkled that it was decided to reshoot the scene with him wearing an ascot. One day he saw me looking at him and said suddenly, "I've lost weight because I recently had hepatitis." He had to be self-conscious about his appearance because he did not look well, and he had been such a handsome man. When I heard the terrible news, I felt sorry for him. He was sweet, very pleasant to work with, and it must have been horrifying to accept so suddenly what was then a death sentence.

I felt sorry for Helmut Berger in another way. He was easily the most feminine actor I have ever worked with. Most gay actors of that time, like Rock Hudson, had a very strong masculine persona, even if it didn't mirror their real-life behavior. Berger seemed to have none. I couldn't tap into a masculine core. He was soft and willowy and feminine in his voice and gestures. It did not help that he seemed totally at sea

being in America, almost as if he had come from another planet. Unfortunately, all of this was evident on the screen. It was not long before most of his lines, if they had to be retained as plot points, were taken away from him and given to other actors. I wondered at the genius of Luchino Visconti, the Italian director of *The Leopard* and *Death in Venice*, who was Berger's real-life lover. Luchino had made him seem very strong and masculine when he directed him wearing a Nazi uniform in certain scenes of *The Damned*.

*Dynasty* was such a success that Aaron Spelling decided to create a sister series called *The Colbys*. It turned out to be no more than a smudged carbon of *Dynasty*, but it ran for two seasons nonetheless. Doug Cramer let me direct *The Colbys* for a while, and it gave me a chance to work with the great — I repeat, *great*—Barbara Stanwyck. Working with her was one of the high points of my career. I remembered watching her clown around on the set so many years ago when I was a messenger boy at Paramount. My heart was in my throat the day I met her. She had worked with so many great directors in so many memorable films — I was just awed. In real life, she was just as I had hoped: direct, honest, and intelligent. We hit it off right away, and my fears and hesitations quickly vanished. I knew we would have a fine working relationship.

At this point in her career, she was in her seventies, about the same age as Gloria Swanson had been in *Killer Bees*. She had been a chain smoker and had emphysema, which required her to keep an oxygen tank at all times. I often saw her trundling the tank about on its little cart, but this did not interfere with her performance or her presence on the set. She was always the consummate professional—her lines memorized, her feelings at the service of the art. Considering her precarious health, it was amazing to see her refuse a stand-in and remain standing on the set while the cameraman did the lighting around her. I realized that this was what she had been doing for years and years, and she would not let her illness prevent her from doing it now.

She did, however, complain to me about the artificiality of the sets. They did not present her with a realistic environment in which she, as an actress, could feel comfortable. It was true, of course. There was no evidence that people lived in those sets

— no books, no magazines, no personal articles of any kind. It was like acting in a department store window — a quintessential Reagan-era image, all surface. So Miss Stanwyck brought her own reality to the set. One day she said, “I’m going to make this table into my desk. And during the scene, I’m going to be studying my racing form and handicapping the horses.” She objected to any lack of professionalism in the younger players. She took particular umbrage at Maxwell Caulfield, who often behaved like a young colt let out of the corral. He tended to be late and sometimes would simply disappear altogether. From Miss Stanwyck’s point of view, this was grossly improper behavior, not to be countenanced.

My friend Nancy Malone was scheduled to direct the Thanksgiving episode of *The Colbys* that year. She was new and inexperienced and faced the classic directorial conundrum of putting together a scene involving a group of characters at a dinner table. You have to plan the cutting in advance so that everyone will be looking in the proper direction when talking to someone on one side of the table or the other. It sounds easy but it isn’t. Nancy told me that she had diagrammed the placement of each character at the table and had carefully worked out the shooting of the scene so that all the angles would fit together properly when cut. I complimented her on the precision and thoroughness of her preparation.

A few days after she had shot her episode, I ran into her and asked her how the dinner table scene had gone. It had turned out to be a nightmare. “But you had put it together so well!” I protested. “What went wrong?” In her plan, she had made the mistake of seating Miss Stanwyck next to Max. When she arrived on the set and was told where she would be seated, she rebelled. “I will not sit next to Max,” she announced. And what Missy wanted, Missy got. Indeed, Aaron Spelling had sent down an edict to that effect. So poor Nancy had to revise her seating diagram at the last minute, and all her careful planning went out the window. Miss Stanwyck bowed out of the show after the first season, and I missed her very much.

Embarrassed by being reduced to episodic television direction to earn a living, I explained to people that I brought my art to film and my craft to my work for the electronic screen. I was always aware of the great difference that there is

between film and television. It is more than just the obvious physical difference. It is also profoundly metaphysical. For instance, even for those with a smattering of astrological knowledge, it can be understood that cinema is under the planet of illusion, Neptune, whereas television falls under the influence of the planet Uranus. A film offers refracted light from a screen; television images are self-contained electronic impulses.

Films can be reproduced on television, but seeing a film in this medium is a poor substitute for the magic of moving shadows on a screen. Of course, viewers en masse make no such distinction; however, when a film has been particularly enjoyed, you often hear people say, "I'd love to see it again on the big screen." Unconsciously, they are responding to the metaphysical imperative involved. I was shooting TV shows on film, while that served only as an interim function on the way to its electronic reproduction on the TV sets of the world. TV shows were not intended to be projected on a screen. I was out of my milieu, moving farther and farther away from the art that I knew film could be.

# Climbing Uphill

## *Ruby and Mata Hari*

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My dear old friend George Edwards came to my rescue again, if only temporarily. He had a script about an ex-gangster's moll who runs a drive-in movie theater and is possessed by the spirit of her dead father. The script, called *Ruby*, was indebted to *The Exorcist*, which was quite a hit at the time. George worked from a story by Steve Krantz, who was primarily known for producing cartoon movies of *Spider-Man* and *Fritz the Cat*. I had no inkling of the kind of ominous role he would play in this film. It turned out to be the most nightmarish experience of my career.

I didn't know anything about Steve Krantz. If I had, I would have never agreed to do the film. There is no one that I've ever encountered in the film business for whom I have more loathing and contempt than Steve Krantz. He did everything possible to destroy the film. It became a travesty of what I shot and what I intended it to be. Krantz had visions of grandeur and pretensions of some kind of artistic facility that were completely without merit. As he was serving as executive producer on the film, I had little room for dissent against his ridiculous mandates.

First, he hired an incompetent cameraman in the person of William Mendenhall, who showed not an iota of professionalism. Mendenhall was Krantz's friend but could not even get the exposures right. At one point, in the interest of "speeding things up," Krantz directed the cameraman to light the whole set with flat lighting and move the camera around in it. This was a film that was all atmosphere. I just couldn't allow it and told them I would not shoot that way. He finally gave in with great reluctance, but we fought constantly. He continued

to maul the production, making arbitrary cuts and cutting corners at every turn, all the while calling himself “a creative producer.”

I had the usual battles over casting. The producers wanted Tina Louise in the lead. George and I fought that idea tooth and nail, and thank god we prevailed. We were able to cast Piper Laurie, who did wonderful work. Many people have suggested that we cast Piper because of her role in *Carrie*, but the script that became *Ruby* had been written long before that film’s release. We desperately wanted Jack La Rue to play the part of the old crippled gangster, but again, the producers prevailed and cast Fred Kohler Jr., a nobody actor who brought nothing to the part. Still, I was able to cast Stuart Whitman (whom I’d worked with before), Roger Davis, and Janit Baldwin as the possessed little girl who turned in an excellent performance.

At the end of the production, when we were trying to decide on the music for the film, Steve came in with a list of several younger composers about town who were within our limited price range. Since we had been at such odds, I thought I’d toss him a bone. I said any of the composers on his list were acceptable to me except one: Don Ellis. He was really terrible, and his music would actively be counterproductive to the effectiveness of the film. And of course, that’s the composer Steve chose.

The theatrical version, however compromised, showed in Europe and at drive-ins across the U.S. to receptive audiences. It became one of the highest-grossing independent films before *Halloween*. Steve Krantz had made a deal to have the film released by a company called Dimension, and it was somewhat gratifying when later I heard that the head of Dimension had shut down the business. He declared bankruptcy and put all his money in his daughter’s name before Steve Krantz got a dime.

The final insult was when it came time to edit the film for TV. The film had a good deal of violence and was unacceptable in its theatrical form to be shown on network television. Standards and Practices objected to several scenes, which meant that a good portion of the film had to be cut in order for it to be broadcast. There were so many things that needed to be cut that it ended up too short to fill up the slot, even with commercials. So Steve Krantz hired a nothing director and a

nothing writer and took two minor cast members who were all but extras in the film — that had been *customers* at the drive-in — and built a whole subplot around them. They filmed new scenes and edited them into the ready-for-television version.

For some reason that will always remain mysterious to me, when the film was released on video they chose this ghastly, compromised version rather than the less compromised theatrical version. I was so appalled that I went to the Directors Guild and insisted that my name be taken off of it. It is now directed by Alan Smithee. Still, the film has found an admiring audience in Europe, and every once in a while, I meet someone who considers it one of my best films.

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Even though the road behind me was littered with heartbreak and nighttime soap operas, I still had dreams of directing another feature. When I was given an opportunity to direct *Mata Hari*, I jumped at it. The script was by Joel Ziskin, but I managed to contribute a few ideas to the story. The film was to be shot in Hungary with an Israeli and European cast and crew. I had just finished directing an episode of *Dynasty*, and now I was off to London. The executive producer was Menahem Golan, an Israeli filmmaker who had made a few action films. Menahem and his cousin Yoram Globus ran Cannon Films, which was known for low-budget fare. I was to begin casting and preparing for the film in the Cannon offices on Wardour Street. It was there that I first met my line producer, Rony Yacov, who had only a few producing credits at this point. Trouble started brewing almost immediately when Menahem imposed a cameraman on me, David Gurfinkel. As I have expressed elsewhere, the cameraman is vitally important to my filmmaking, and this one would turn out to be a disaster.

I had insisted on bringing in my own set decorator, Carlos Sutton. The sets and period detailing were very important in this film. While we would be shooting in Hungary, we would be simulating locations in Paris, Germany, and Spain. Bringing him to Budapest meant paying round-trip fare to Europe and his other expenses, but I felt it was worth it. I truly believed the film would have no look if we didn't have Carlos, and I didn't

want to be subjected to a Hungarian who might not understand my preferences. I was forced to make a devil's bargain. I said, "If you'll let me hire Carlos for my set decorator, I'll deal with Gurfinkel." Gurfinkel showed me some footage that looked all right, but he tended to take all my shooting time setting up the lighting. And because he spoke Hebrew, he could say anything to the producers in front of me without me having any idea what it was. I didn't feel I could go to my producers with my concerns, because I was sure Gurfinkel was turning them against me, saying things like "Oh, you should never have hired this director Curtis Harrington. I'm just trying to save the picture for you." I felt I had no defense.

With all that to deal with at the outset, when we got to Hungary we found out that the producers had not yet closed the deal for the financing. For the first few days after we checked into the hotel, Rony Yacov was still in the final negotiations with the Hungarians, and we were all just told to stand by. The deal he made with the Hungarians, who needed the money so desperately, was draconian. What it meant for me was that I was not allowed one minute of overtime. We had to stop at five p.m. on the dot every day. This put me in a straightjacket, especially when it came to locations that we only had access to on certain days. It was a nearly impossible shooting situation.

The costumes were another crucial element of the film that I felt I could not compromise on. My favorite costume designer, Morton Haack, was living in semi-retirement in Rome. I implored him to come out of retirement, and he acquiesced. Rony Yacov agreed to hire him at first, and the costumes began to bring the characters to life. Morton was a craftsman and a perfectionist. He couldn't stand if a costume was not fitted perfectly. The costumes were exquisite, but Rony thought Morton took too much time. He was promptly fired and sent back to Rome. Without him, the wardrobe plot just unraveled. We didn't have the right hats with the right costumes, and the gowns of the star, Sylvia Kristel, were not fitted properly due to her fluctuating weight. Morton's costumes appear in the film, but his name is not on the credits even though he did such beautiful work.

Yacov was a real lug, but he could be amusing. He insisted



on having one particular casting choice. In the film, during the orgy sequence, there is a dueling scene between Mata Hari and a Spanish *signorina* where they are half-nude. Rony came into the Cannon offices one day with a blond Australian girl and said "I've got the perfect girl for the dueling scene. Show him your tits, baby." So she took off her blouse, and they were very generous and attractive. I got the picture right away. I said, "Sure, fine Rony, she'll be great." She was his mistress, of course, and she played her little part with her Australian accent. We attempted to remedy this discrepancy by putting a black wig on her and darkening her skin. Then, back in London, we dubbed in her dialogue with a voice artist who did a lovely Spanish accent.

In the center of the storm was Sylvia Kristel. While she was lovely to look at, she simply could not act. She also had a very addictive personality. We had to hire a sort of caretaker for her, a friend of hers named Neil Robinson who served two functions: coaching her on her lines, and flushing any alcoholic beverages he found around her down the toilet. When I had first met her in Hollywood, she was addicted to cocaine; now at least alcohol was our only worry. Neil kept her from getting drunk most of the time, but every once in a while, a fan might innocently send a bottle of champagne to her dressing room, and she'd be drunk again. It was impossible to work with her when she was drunk. Furthermore, when you take away all the possible temptations from the addictive personality, there is one addiction left: food. All of Sylvia's costumes, which had been made and fitted in Rome by Morton, no longer fit by the time we were shooting in Hungary.

Sylvia had appeared in many erotic films and had a loyal following. In all of her films before *Mata Hari*, her voice had been dubbed by another actress. Whether rightly or wrongly, I wanted her to use her own voice in this film. The producers were not going for it, so at first, they dubbed the entire role with a credible actress. But it turned out they had signed a contract with Sylvia that said she was to use her own voice, so in the end, I inadvertently got my way. I also worked with her in terms of physical acting. I would tell her which direction to look in — left or right — and when to look at another actor. She would have never thought to do these things on her own.

I think it turned out well. One French reviewer even said something to the effect of, “Kristel shows acting talent in this film that we had not suspected she had.” As was the pattern with many of my feature films, *Mata Hari* was better received in Europe than in the United States. Sylvia was a huge star in France, and her fans came out in droves. These days *Mata Hari* enjoys a certain cult status among them, and maybe even a few fans of my own. I do believe I was able to add my touch to the proceedings.

The question was, now what? Would I be able to get more television work? Would I ever get another feature project of my own made? I had fallen into a trap. When the feature work dried up and I needed to make a living, I couldn’t get any television work, because I was seen as a feature film director. But I managed to break the barrier and directed a few TV movies. Then the only thing I could do was TV movies, and now no one saw me as feature director. I couldn’t do episodic TV because I was known as a director of TV movies. Then once I started doing *Dynasty*, I could only do nighttime soaps. My career was in a constant downward spiral. I was at the bottom of the slippery slope.

## Finding the Magic Again

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When I returned to the states, I directed a few more episodes of *The Colbys*, and for the next decade, attempted to get other movie projects off the ground. I had dozens of scripts and story ideas, but the deals either never got made or would come undone at some point in the laborious process. During my career, I had tried to come up with projects that were, on the surface, commercial enough to interest somebody into letting me make them, but I was never able to think of a film as a purely commercial product. From my earliest years, I always believed that film was art. Paul Rotha had thought so too—as had Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, and Josef von Sternberg. They made art.

After *Games*, I was never again to make a film that ended up being entirely as I conceived it as a director. My films would always be compromised by the heavy hand of insensitive and loutish producers, telling me to cut this or change that, in what were often arbitrary and harmful decisions. I have never forgotten how Martin Ransohoff, the executive producer of *What's the Matter with Helen?*, announced, “I don’t like dissolves,” just after I had carefully built the continuity of a whole sequence around their use. Straight cuts was what *he* liked — just straight cuts. What an impoverishment of the director’s creative repertory! And for what? The only possible justification for such an attitude would be if it had a measurable effect on the film’s box-office performance. This was obviously something that no audience would consciously notice. But the *unconscious* effect is something else. Such a detail can profoundly affect the rhythm and beauty of the entire film. I would fight this fight over and over again with

each film I made — winning some, but losing far more.

As I looked toward my next project, I decided that what I needed was to go back to what I first loved about film. I had been drawn to the art of it, to its potential to make deeply personal statements. I decided I would make my own independent film with no thought of profit or pandering to the executives or their illiterate audiences. Just like I had with *Fragment of Seeking* or *On the Edge*, I would make a personal film that came from my deepest intuitive soul.

I went all the way back to the story that had haunted me so early in my life, “The Fall of the House of Usher.” It would be a sort of full circle that connected to the very first film I made as a 14-year-old with my 8mm camera. I called on friends for money and help, and they were very generous. My dear old friend Gary Graver agreed to be the cinematographer and brought his own grip truck. Panavision provided a camera free of charge, and we would use my own house as the setting. Roger Corman came through again and provided insurance so that we could shoot one day in a cemetery. My friend, the director Bill Condon, whom I had met when he asked me be an advisor on his film about James Whale, *Gods and Monsters*, also generously lent to the cause.

I entreated my friends to act in the film as well. Sean Nepita, who plays the leading role, had appeared mostly in commercials; Fabrice Uzan played Pierre, my housekeeper; and many friends old and new showed up for the party scene, including dear Renate Druks whom I’d kept in touch with over the years. The roles of Roderick and Madeline Usher would both be played by me — there was no question. I couldn’t conceive of it any other way. It was part of the whole texture of the film that I wanted to create. *Usher* is about twins who must remain forever psychically joined. In the Poe story, they “share the same soul.” And it is also about my twin obsessions: art and death in the poetic dance that never ends.

I was thrilled with the results. It was, indeed, the film I had intended to make. Nobody had told me what script to write, what scenes to shoot, or how it should be cut. It was truly an heir to my early films. The film premiered at American Cinematheque in Hollywood to an audience filled with new fans and old friends.

Lately there has been a growing interest in my old films, as DVDs for the home become more popular. I have been interviewed for commentaries, and slowly my movies are gaining appreciation from a new, young audience.

It is still interesting to me that, without any astrological knowledge whatsoever, I nevertheless chose “Neptune Productions” as the name for my first effort at creating a filmmaking entity. Cinema falls under the sign of Neptune, the planet of illusion. As I write, the word is out that in the next few years film will disappear, and only digital reproduction will remain. This sad state of affairs is, for me, almost too terrible to contemplate, and yet I must remind myself that film came out of a technological revolution, and therefore it must be inevitable that another technological revolution will replace it. This is at once the curse of film and perhaps its long-term salvation. It becomes more permanent as it becomes more evanescent. Just as the development of sound-on-film technology doomed the silent film as a creative medium, now digitization will doom film itself. It is as if the painter’s traditional pigments have been replaced by artificial colors that could never match the qualities that made older paintings great. Films can be reproduced on television, or made with digital technology, but a real film is in the magic of refracted light on a screen, of moving shadows.

## Appendix One

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# The Secrets of the Sea

A story by Curtis Harrington

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The sailor had been standing at the bar for some time before he first noticed her. He was chatting with three other sailors, and it was not until their conversation bogged down into an argument over who pushed whom overboard when they passed the equator the first time that he glanced away for a moment and found himself looking directly into her eyes. He realized then that she had been watching him. The girl was quite extraordinary. Seated in front of an illuminated aquarium, she appeared almost to be submerged underwater, and her hair glowed a pale green. She wore a blue, body-clinging dress that accentuated the odd color of her hair, and her eyes were dark rimmed thickly in black.

He did not turn back to his companions, but after watching her a while to make sure that the invitation he saw in her eyes was genuine, made his way across the room to her table. When he reached her, she nodded toward the empty chair opposite her, and he sat down. At first, they said nothing but simply continued to evaluate each other visually while sipping their drinks. The bar in which this meeting took place was a seafront dive called Seaside Village. Its sea motif décor — aquarium, ceiling of draped fish netting, patterns of sea shells on the walls — was suffused with a thick blue haze of cigarette smoke, an atmosphere that quickly, once their meeting had been effected, grew oppressive. The girl presently suggested, “How about getting some air?”

“Fine,” the sailor answered. He put a couple of dollars down on the table, and they got up and left.

Once outside, the sailor, whose name was Harry Koretzky, noticed by the ample light of a streetlamp, glowing through a swirl of ocean mist, that the girl's hair was not green at all, but a kind of dull blond. It had been the greenish light from the aquarium that made it appear that way. Although she seemed now less extraordinary, he was still interested.

"Do you mind walking for a while?" she asked. Her voice had an agreeable quality, low and rather gurgly, as if it were filtered through water.

"Not at all," he replied.

They walked on in silence. The repeated hissing of the breakers sounded very close, unnaturally magnified in the stillness of the foggy night. The street they followed was deserted, flowing with white mist, pierced here and there by the solitary light of a streetlamp. They were walking through Venice, the town of California that was meant to have been a grand replica of the enchanting Italian city, a seaside resort of palaces rising out of glittering canals upon which specially imported gondolas would glide. But like so many real-estate dreams of the twenties, the idea had proven to be totally impractical. The canals were difficult to dig, the water became stagnant, the city quickly infested with mosquitos. The few canals that had been dug were refilled, and in place of the extravagant dream, Venice became a district of small frame houses cramped together on narrow streets slanting down toward a boardwalk, a littered beach, to a sea often polluted with sewage. These details of place had disappeared, however, in the foggy night, and Harry and the girl walking at his side might have been in any seaport town.

No longer sure of his whereabouts, Harry, who liked to indulge in little adventures, was pleased, and he matched the stride of the girl at his side step for step, their soles tapping hollowly on the boardwalk beneath them. Far off a foghorn pleaded with the impenetrable night. One, two, three times it sounded, then was silent. Presently, they approached a narrow white building with vacant lots on each side of it whose top was lost in the gray sea-fog. The girl announced, "This is where I live."

Next to an empty store window was a small glass-paneled door with a curious, rather Arabic looking design worked on it.

They went through this door and entered into a narrow stairwell. The stairs, which they began climbing, continued without variation for six flights. On the sixth floor, they walked down a hallway where the girl stopped before a door and produced a key from a small purse. As she pushed the door open, the illumination from the hallway fell dimly in a widening arc into the room, and Harry caught a glimpse inside of tiny points glittering in the air. When she snapped on the light, Harry saw that these were small sea objects suspended on almost invisible wires from the ceiling: miniature starfish, transparent seahorses, blue and orange coral, delicate pink shells. The walls of the room were painted a deep cerulean blue.

As he glanced about him with a look of surprise on his face — for he had never seen anything quite like this before — the girl explained, “I collect things from the ocean. They’re so pretty, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “They are.”

The girl glanced at herself in a large jagged piece of mirror that hung on one wall, then sat down on the edge of a low bed which was covered with blue cushions. The only other furnishings in the small room were a bookcase built from rough wood planks suspended across red bricks and three tiny black children’s chairs. The low ceiling, the miniature furniture, the sea objects suspended in air — somehow swinging slightly, continuously moving although there was no wind — gave Harry a feeling of being enclosed, underneath a weight. The impression was not, however, a disagreeable one. Instead, it was calming, slightly hypnotic. The girl had designed a place to repose, to indulge in slow-motion movements only.

When she leaned back on the bed, her blond hair spread out like a pale gold fan about her head. Feeling a little awkward, Harry sat down uncomfortably on one of the tiny black chairs. She regarded him indolently, holding her eyes half shut.

“Come over here,” she said, indicating with a brief wave of her hand the space beside her on the bed.

Pleased to be commanded, Harry went over to the bed and stretched out beside her. On their backs, they looked at the ceiling.

“What’s your name?” Harry asked.



"Maura."

"Last name?"

"That's all there is."

"Really?"

"All I use, anyway. Professional name."

"Oh? What do you do?"

"I'm in the carny on the pier."

"One of the dancing girls?"

"No," Maura laughed. "I'm in something much more glamorous than that"

"What?"

"A mermaid."

"What?"

"Maura the Mermaid. Haven't you ever heard of me? Little boys pay fifteen cents to see me. Gives them a thrill. I don't wear anything but a long tail."

Harry reflected for a moment. "What's it made out of?"

"Which?"

"The tail."

"Oh, sort of black lamé. It's shiny and looks kind of scaly, like fish skin. But it isn't really convincing, I don't think, and I've been telling Sam — that's my boss — that if he'd pay for it, I'd try to make something better. But he says he don't want to make any bigger capital investment." And she added under her breath, "The cheapskate."

"Hmm. Peculiar occupation. Is it fun working as a mermaid?"

"Kind of, at times, but there are drawbacks. Like the other day Sam got furious at me for chewing gum. He said it didn't look right, but I get tired just lying in that box staring up at a bunch of silly gawking schoolkids, and anyway, why shouldn't a mermaid chew gum? She's at least half human, ain't she?" Maura giggled at her little joke.

Harry smiled. "Sure. But how is it done? The water, I mean."

"Simple. I'm at the bottom of this big box, lying on some sand, and then just up above me, there's a layer of glass filled with water and a little seaweed. Once in a while, I swish my tail sort of slow-like. It really looks pretty good. Once when business was really booming, we had a relief girl and I got to see her."

"Sounds terrific. I ought to come and see you some time."

"Come tomorrow if you don't have anything else planned," Maura said. "I work every day except Monday." She continued, lowering her voice to a whisper breathed close into Harry's ear, "You won't even have to pay a dime, sailor."

Harry Koretzky awoke to the distinctive odor of frying fish. First, while his eyes were still closed, he smelled it, then as he began to remember where he was, he heard the sizzling coming from the next room. He opened his eyes. Even in the bright morning light, the illusion of the room persisted. The artifice was less apparent than the effect.

"Maura," he called. "What time is it?"

"Almost noon." Her voice came cheerily from the direction of the sizzling fish. "I'll have lunch ready in a minute."

"Thanks, that's swell." Harry tasted something terrible in his mouth, and his head felt swelled and thick. "Oh my god," he muttered, "I feel *awful*."

In magical reply to his plight, Maura appeared before him holding a glass filled with a reddish liquid.

"Here," she said, extending the glass toward him. "This'll do wonders for you."

"Thanks."

Scowling, Harry drank the potion, which, even through his badly working taste buds, he could tell was mostly tomato, lemon, and something gooey — an oyster perhaps. Afterward, he did feel better, even hungry, he realized. The odor of the fish, despite its strength, began to seem rather attractive.

The windows, which the night before had been hidden behind heavy curtains, now looked out upon a small terrace, just large enough to hold a round wicker table and two chairs. The table had been set for lunch, and in a moment Maura appeared from the kitchen with an oblong-shaped platter in her hands. On it were two fried mackerel.

"Time to eat," Maura announced. "Hurry, before it gets cold."

Harry reached for his shorts, slipped them on, and after reflecting for a moment, asked Maura if it would be all right for him to go out on the terrace dressed that way.

"Sure," she answered. "We're at the top of the tallest building in blocks. I always take sunbaths here in the raw."

As he seated himself, Harry looked over the edge of the

terrace at the scene below them. He could clearly see the boardwalk, the beach, the sea, and the Ocean Park Pier with its enormous, twisting, snake-like rollercoaster. The day was sultry hot, the high noon sun obscured in a dazzling white haze. Along the distant pier, a few lonely figures wandered, and the usual groupings of families and young people and children — mostly those who lived by the sea and, consequently, seemed always somewhat bored by it — were clustered about on the pale yellow stretch of beach. Along the boardwalk, the multicolored bubbles of the balloon man floated by, the one touch of gaiety in an otherwise rather bleak scene.

Harry almost gagged on his first mouthful of the strongly flavored fish, but out of politeness, disguised his reaction and complimented Maura on her cooking.

"Thanks. I just love fish," she said. "And seafood — oysters and clams and lobsters and crabs and sea spiders. There's so much that's good to eat in the ocean. Have you ever eaten octopus?"

"No. I've always wanted to taste it though."

"Baby, squid is the best. It's so tender."

Maura sighed and looked out toward the water. She had stopped eating, and the partly torn-apart mackerel on her plate looked, Harry mused, like the still remains of something savagely, cruelly attacked. At this moment, it occurred to him that the law of the sea must be the same as the law of the jungle: the gazelle and the lion, the dolphin and the shark.

While Maura's face was still averted from him, Harry heard the cry of a seagull, attracted by the fish on their plates, and then saw it swooping down toward the terrace. Too timid to land directly on the table, the bird alighted instead on the edge of the balustrade, quite near to Maura. Then, very suddenly, in a lightning-quick movement, Maura reached out and held the gull by one leg. In another second, she had pulled it toward her and enclosed its wildly flapping wings in her hands. She looked at Harry and smiled.

"Surprised you, didn't I?" she said.

He closed his mouth. "Yeah, you sure did. Where on earth did you ever learn to do that?"

"When I was a child," she replied ambiguously. "I think I'll have him for dinner."

"But they aren't good to eat, are they?" Harry protested.

"I don't suppose most people would like them," said Maura. And then she added with satisfaction, "But *I* like them a lot." With her hand she felt the bird's body. "Hmm," she murmured. "He'll be delicious. Nice and plump."

Harry felt rather appalled by Maura's action, yet he reasoned that what had happened was actually no different than if she had caught a pigeon or a stray rooster. It was even very clever of her to have been able to catch a fast-moving creature like a seagull. A talent, really.

Maura excused herself and carried the frightened bird into the kitchen. A moment later, Harry heard the violent beating of the freed wings and a thin, plaintive screeching, then suddenly the sounds stopped and in the silence he could hear the tap run, filling a pan with water. Afterward, Maura reappeared, drying her hands on a red-splotched towel.

"I'll let him soak in water this afternoon," she announced. "It'll be easier to take out the feathers."

That afternoon, Harry Koretzky accompanied Maura to the pier to see her work. As they walked toward the end of the pier where the mermaid booth was situated, she nodded and spoke to most of the other carnival people who were just opening up their concessions for the afternoon. They passed the rollercoaster, the Whirl-a-Gig, the Loop-O-Plane, the Merry-Go-Round, the Giant Ferris Wheel, Toonerville, the Mirror Maze, the Penny Arcade, the games of skill and chance, and the food booths, before Maura at last announced, "Well, here we are."

Harry looked up and saw the sign, huge letters on a canvas stretched above a high, narrow ticket booth with a small silver microphone on it: *SEE HER ALIVE! MAURA, THE MERMAID. AMAZING FREAK OF NATURE! ONLY GENUINE MERMAID IN CAPTIVITY. HALF-HUMAN, HALF-FISH! ADMISSION ONLY 15 CENTS inc. tax.*

The ticket booth was empty. Behind it, to the right, stairs led up to a platform with a railing around it, in the middle of which was an enormous black coffin-like box.

"Come on," said Maura, taking Harry's hand.

Harry let her lead him up the steps. They walked around the box, which was covered on top with a tight wire mesh so that you could not easily see into it, and there, sitting on a canvas

stool was Maura's employer, Sam. He was a huge man with a broad flat face in which his tiny black eyes and small nose and mouth were placed like pieces of fruit in a pudding. He wore a blue shirt and khaki trousers with black suspenders, and he appeared to be somewhat out of sorts.

"Where you been, honey?" he asked Maura. His voice was grating and peculiarly high-pitched. "I been waitin' so long."

"Oh, Sam," said Maura petulantly. "It don't make any difference if I'm a few minutes late. Nothing really gets started around here till at least four, you know that."

"Okay, honey. I ain't complainin'. Only now you're here, let's get going, huh?"

"Sure." Then Maura said, very casually. "Oh, Sam, I want to introduce you to a friend of mine."

Before she had a chance to mention Harry's name, Sam simply said, "Hiya sailor," and walked away down the stairs and climbed heavily into the booth.

Maura said to Harry, "Look, I'll get into my costume, and then you can see me in the box. I want to know what you think."

"Okay."

Maura disappeared behind a curtain at the back of the platform. To kill time while waiting for her, Harry walked down the steps and approached the booth. Sam was sitting with his pudgy hands cupped under his chin, staring vacantly at the few passersby.

"It's quite a hot day today, isn't it?" Harry volunteered.

Sam turned his head slowly and looked at the young sailor without any change of expression. "Yeah," he muttered.

"Have you and Maura had this show very long?" Harry asked. "Long enough," replied Sam.

"I suppose she does it pretty well, doesn't she?"

"She's okay."

Harry couldn't think of anything else to say, so he looked across the way at the Octopus, which was just starting its first dizzying ride. It was going faster and faster, and the few people on it were beginning to scream.

Suddenly, Sam said, while staring at Harry with the unwavering insistence of a cow, "How long've you known Maura?"

“Not very long,” Harry replied airily, deciding that he could also be vague.

“Yeah,” Sam said again, more to himself this time than the sailor beside him. Harry finally turned his head away and stared again across at the slowing Octopus.

Distantly, he heard a muffled voice call, “All right!” It was Maura. The sound came from the bottom of the black box. He hurried up the stairs. Behind him, even before he reached the platform, Sam’s odd, high voice, magnified enormously by the loudspeaker, began its exhortation: “Maura, the Mermaid! The one, the only phenomenon of its kind in captivity! See the strangest creature in the world. Half-woman, half-fish. Alive, living underwater! See her now. Only fifteen cents. Not fifty. Not twenty-five. Only fifteen cents for the biggest thrill in your life. Maura, the Mermaid...”

In order to see her, it was necessary for Harry to put his face very close to the wire mesh, and at the same time, cup his hands about his eyes to keep out the reflected light. Then dimly through what seemed fathoms of pale green water, he could make out the figure: the voluptuous nude torso of a young woman, and growing out of it, a long black shining tail ending in forked fins. Occasionally, the fins would swish slowly and the head would move gently from side to side. It was a living bit of legend imprisoned cruelly in a narrow tank.

The illusion was perfect. Just the proper dimness of light had been achieved so that Maura appeared to be immersed underwater, and the false material of her tail was transfigured by vagueness into the apparent reality of genuine fish skin. Even her blond hair seemed to move about her head and shoulders and breasts like thin tentacles of a polyp. It was a marvelous piece of showmanship. Harry felt eager to compliment both Sam and Maura on their unique talent.

Soon, caught by the lure of Sam’s commanding, wheedling voice, the people began to arrive. As Maura had told Harry, her audience consisted mostly of little boys in puberty and early adolescence. It was not hard to understand why. They were at that age where magic still seems possible, if no longer probable, and sex is still veiled but no longer unknown. Here was a chance to discover a little more of both. The boys came for magic and stayed for the sight of the forbidden breasts.

Moreover, the sensuality of the slow, water-filled movements of the figure achieved an atavistic suggestion that communicated itself directly onto the unconscious. The image of the imprisoned mermaid was of the sort that recurs in dreams.

Following their first meeting, Harry, who fancied at first that he had fallen in love with Maura, began to see her whenever a weekend pass made it possible for him to come to Venice from San Pedro, where he was stationed. They would get together Saturday night, and as it was still summer, would spend Sunday mornings on the beach. Maura enjoyed diving and hunting for things under the sea, and during the time she spent in the water, Harry most often rested, tanning himself in the sun. The times that they thus filled were pleasant, but gradually as he saw her more often, his love for Maura began to wane. He began to find her irritating and tiresome.

After that first day, Maura never asked him to visit her on the pier again. He gathered that this was because she didn't want Sam to know about their relationship. Harry suspected that Sam had some strange and unpleasant power over her, but the exact nature of this remained a mystery to him, a mystery that he did not especially wish to fathom. Maura seldom mentioned Sam, except to explain that she had been an orphan, that he had found her, adopted her, and given her work.

She was quite childlike in the way she took pleasure from the beach and the water and in the finding of new seashells. Her collection of objects from the ocean kept growing and growing, and her apartment, too small to hold them all, began to look cluttered and messy. Harry noticed that a slight, unpleasant smell of dead fish clung to the place, despite his attempt to keep the doors to the terrace open during his visits. It got so that finally he no longer wanted to go there.

One day Maura said, "Next week let's take a boat ride together. I want to dive deeper. I haven't found everything yet."

This was typical of the sort of vague statement Maura constantly made that Harry found irritating. It sounded as though there were a certain prescribed number of things she had to get out of the sea — a quite unreasonable idea.

Harry agreed to her suggestion but secretly resolved that this would be their last day together. He had had enough. He

sensed that she had fallen too much in love with him, that her passion for him had begun to burst reason, just as his desire for her, inversely, had shriveled and was dying. To him remained only memories of past pleasurable moments, while in Maura's mind, it was clear that some terrible vision of the future tauntingly wavered.

They took a rowboat. Harry told Maura he thought it was too small, that on the high sea it would undoubtedly be dangerous, but she insisted it would be all right. "After all," she reasoned. "I only want to do a little diving. Anyway, we can't afford anything bigger."

Harry at last agreed.

The day was clear blue, windless, and hot. They descended a narrow ladder down the side of the pier and stepped into the waiting boat. "I can row when you get tired, darling," Maura volunteered. Harry did not expect, however, to need her assistance. They didn't intend to go out very far.

The oars creaked and squeaked in their locks, and the paddles splashed as they hit the water. Again and again: down, *splash*, up and over and down, *splash*, up and over and down. Maura sat proudly at the bow, smiling back at her sailor, murmuring little words of encouragement to him. It didn't take long before Harry felt a strain in his back, but he tried not to let Maura notice his fatigue. He kept up the rhythm with determination and they glided ahead, ever farther out, ever further until Maura stopped him by saying, "I think that's far enough, darling."

The creaking and splashing stopped. In the sudden stillness, the steady swells of the ocean bore the boat up and then down gently in the valleys and hills of water. Harry glanced up. The harbor and city horizon had vanished. They were lost.

Alarmed at their plight, Harry said, "Maura, we've gone too far! How will we know which direction is the shore?"

Maura smiled rather smugly and began to adjust her goggles for diving. "Don't be silly. If worse comes to worst, we can always navigate by the stars."

"By the stars! But we ought to start back by two."

Without answering, she dived into the water.

Harry waited. Her whole scheme now seemed to him decidedly dangerous. In a moment, her head appeared, and she



was treading water.

"It's marvelous!" she called to him enthusiastically. "Oh, if only you could see it!"

"See what?"

"The things under the ocean..."

She dived again. This time it seemed to Harry that she stayed down long beyond the time it would be possible to hold her breath, and he became frightened. Yet there was nothing he could do. He knew how to swim, but he was an inexperienced diver, and he had neglected to bring any diving goggles.

He called Maura's name several times, knowing perfectly well that it wouldn't do any good because she couldn't hear him anyway.

Then she miraculously appeared once again.

"You shouldn't scare me like that," Harry said. "You were down too long that time."

Maura didn't answer. She seemed out of breath, and when she swam near enough, Harry helped her climb into the boat. The sudden weight caused it to tip dangerously, but when he got her shoulders over the side, she fell in the rest of the way. She squeezed the water out of her hair and sat there panting and dripping and smiling at him.

"I don't think you ought to try that again," Harry said.

"No?"

"It's too dangerous. I was afraid you weren't coming up again that time."

"Were you, darling?"

"Yes, I was."

She stared at him, smiling. He couldn't imagine what she must be thinking. It was high noon now. The sun beat down hotly, hotly, and the boat kept rocking ever so slowly, following the endless rhythm of the swells. Harry, though ordinarily not prone to seasickness, began to feel a kind of nausea. The water glittered up at them as though they were on a surface of blinding yellow lights. Like in a badly photographed film, everything began to seem overexposed, and to protect his eyes, Harry tried to close them just enough to filter the light yet still be able to see.

Then Maura said something. Harry couldn't hear her very clearly over the water splashing against the side of the boat,

but it sounded like, “— so beautiful, the kingdom of the sea. You must see it my darling sailor, with me....”

Maura stood up. The boat tipped and swayed — she was coming toward him. He opened his eyes wide against the white brilliance and saw twitching hands descending and heard her voice, grown hysterical and queer.

“Yes, yes, my darling, I must show you —,” and she screamed it close into his ear, “the secrets of the sea!”

Harry fought. Like a cat, she clawed at him, pulled at him, tried to take him with her. That was what inspired him with horror. Never for a moment did she attempt to push him into the sea, to destroy him alone, but kept circling her wet arms around him in a compelling, passionate embrace. Maura wished to enmesh him in her own fantastic dream.

Their struggle continued for several moments while Harry resisted with every bit of force, both physical and mental, left to him. At last, perhaps because she was very wet, her almost nude body slippery as if it were covered in slime, she slipped and slid away from him, backward, into the water. Before she went under, she emitted a kind of wounded animal cry that ended in a gurgle.

For a long time, Harry waited in the boat, trembling, too bewildered to think but wondering still if she might return. Finally, he realized that she would not, and when a wind came up and the reddening sun showed that it was late afternoon, he began to row. Some instinct seemed to tell him which direction he should take, for soon he saw the horizon and, following his course with all the strength he could command, managed to get to the shore. He docked the boat at a different place from where they had rented it and immediately caught a bus back to his camp.

Harry watched the papers very carefully for any news of her body, but after a week went by and still he found no mention of her, he began to wonder. Perhaps her body had been devoured by sharks. Yet such predatory animals are rare in that part of the Pacific, and they had remained near enough to the coast so that the tide would naturally have carried her body quite rapidly toward the shore. The fact that it had not been found, however, did not seem unduly strange. More odd was Sam’s failure to report her disappearance. Absolutely nothing

appeared in the papers announcing a search for a young woman answering Maura's description. Harry finally decided that he could only find out what happened by going to see Sam. This would at least provide him with a clue.

Harry was afraid to let Sam recognize him, for he realized that Maura's strange employer might just be waiting to find him and accuse him of foul play. So he disguised himself in civilian clothes. He rented a hotel room and there put on dark glasses and a felt hat pulled low and a black overcoat with a high collar, which he could draw around his face. He knew that he looked rather strange to be dressed like this, but fall was coming on and he felt that anything less thorough might betray his identity.

He went on a Saturday night, drawing confidence from the fact that the pier would be thickly crowded. The rides were whirring and whizzing and whining on each side of him as he made his way through the jostling mobs whose laughter and screams exploded high and shrill as they ran breathlessly from one giant contraption to another. The men in the booths kept calling out, "Try your chance, try your chance, try your chance," often directly at him, even though he clearly would have no part of their game. Although he hurried, the walk to the end of the pier through the dense crowd seemed to take hours.

First, he heard the familiar high voice over the loudspeaker, then he saw that Sam was there, just as before, seated above the ticket stand repeating through the tiny silver microphone the same endless spiel: "Maura, the Mermaid! The one, the only phenomenon of its kind in captivity! See the strangest creature..."

Harry looked up at the sign. Something about it had been changed. Certain words seemed to be missing, although he couldn't be sure because he felt tense and nervous and wasn't able to remember the sign exactly as it had been. Seeing how the show was continuing, his first thought was that Sam must have gotten a relief girl to go on in Maura's absence. That seemed reasonable enough, but it still didn't explain why her disappearance had not been reported.

Harry's curiosity made him wish, in any event, to look at the new girl, to see if she would be as successful in creating the

illusion as Maura had been. Pulling his hat low to obscure his face, he reached his hand up over the top of the ticket booth and deposited a dime and a nickel. In return, a ticket was pressed into his hand and he hurried around to the stairs. As he reached the top of them, he glanced back at Sam.

Like a huge dead moon, Sam's face was turned toward him, glowing uncannily white, and twisted into it there seemed to be a knowing, sardonic grin.

Startled, Harry turned away very quickly and stepped onto the platform, afraid that he had been recognized. But Sam's voice started immediately again over the loudspeaker, and Harry decided that he must surely have been looking at someone else.

At first, the box was completely hidden from Harry's view by the people gathered around it. Not little boys this time — and Harry wondered if this was because of the late hour — but adults. They whispered and commented, and although he strained to hear them, he couldn't catch a word. When at last one of them moved away, he took his place next to the box.

It was no longer necessary to peer close through the wire mesh, through the thick green distorting transparency of the water. Harry pulled out a handkerchief and pressed it to his nose to keep from gagging on the terrible, sickening odor of formaldehyde that invaded his nostrils. Maura, *his* Maura, was floating in the liquid preservative, dull dead eyes staring, the lower half of her body as surely the tail of a fish as that of the mackerel they had eaten during the summer of their love.

## Appendix Two

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# An Index to the Films of Josef von Sternberg

by Curtis Harrington

*Edited by Herman G. Weinberg*

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The author wishes to acknowledge with thanks the kindness of Miss Ona Munson, Mr. Hans Dreier, Mr. Paul Ivano, and Mr. Robert Florey for the granting of interviews and providing heretofore inaccessible material.

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He wishes to further express his indebtedness to the lectures given by Josef von Sternberg at the University of Southern California, and to thank Mr. von Sternberg for his kindness in checking this manuscript.

— C.H.

*“To know what to reveal, and what to conceal, is the secret of art.”*

— JOSEF VON STERNBERG

An intense awareness of light and shadow, as the very substance of cinema, is the basis from which all the films of von Sternberg spring. His cutting and approach to sound have often been as creative as his use of the camera. Throughout his career there has been a constant striving toward an original, formalistic approach to the problems of film creation. These are the aesthetic criteria which have dominated his work: in his most highly developed and individual films he has created an entire world, an almost unreal world created for the senses, a unique “von Sternbergian” world. This is closely related to his deep appreciation of painting as an art. Although he considers the cardinal points of cinematography similar to painting, he is fully aware of their point of departure—motion. Paul Ivano, von Sternberg’s photographer on *The Sea Gull* and *The Shanghai Gesture*, considers him the “only director who knows what he wants to see on the screen.” Von Sternberg knows *how* to light a set; his abilities are those of a fine craftsman as well as a creative artist. He considers the face of the actor as he would a landscape, and lights it accordingly. He is continually concerned with an absolute control over the lighting of a set. This has led him to photograph many of his films entirely on stages, producing to a certain extent the same effect as the German films during their period of superb studio craftsmanship in the early and mid-twenties. Such films create an entirely different atmosphere than those photographed at least partly in natural or open-air settings. To assure a maximum of reflected light he has sprayed trees with aluminum (in *The King Steps Out*), and painted many of his sets entirely white. The latter has allowed him to control the light and dark of a set entirely with its illumination, a method particularly noticeable in *The Case of Lena Smith*, *The Scarlet Empress*, *The Devil Is a Woman* and *The Shanghai Gesture*.

In composing each shot, one of his most important considerations has been to “emotionalize” the dead space between the foreground and background. He has used countless pictorial devices to accomplish this, such as snow, dust, steam, the moving camera, a judicious use of telling objects in the foreground, etc.

Von Sternberg’s treatment of the actor fits in closely with his pictorial sense. He considers the correct choice of the actor

(usually from a pictorial point of view) as one of the most important phases of film production. And correct casting must be followed by an imposition of the director's will on the actor to make him fit in with the character and rhythm of his creation.

He welcomed the arrival of sound while others lamented the passing of the silent film. He was at last able to control his sound instead of being at the mercy of haphazard "musical accompaniments." He feels that sound and camera should be equal, integral partners in film creation. Sound may reinforce the visual image or become a counterpoint to it. Von Sternberg would like to use sound no more realistically than the visual image ("nothing is concealed in speech; the camera conceals a great deal"). By a creative use of sound an international film might be produced with an individual, dubbed-in track for each country.

What emerges finally from von Sternberg's credo, i.e., the director's absolute control over his materials leading to an organic synthesis of sound, image, and cutting, is the conception that the most important resultant in film is its ultimate abstraction. Although he has many further ideas as to the potentialities of the motion picture as a creative medium, von Sternberg believes, contrary to a hopeful younger generation of film students, that film has reached its arpeggio, that it will not improve with time. He considers film making "a commercial profession which uses tools that might be used for the creation of an art."

Josef von Sternberg was born on May 29, 1894, in Vienna. At the age of seven he was brought to New York for the first time, returning to Vienna and emigrating again frequently.

In 1914 von Sternberg entered the film business as a film patcher for the World Film Company in New York. Shortly before World War I he became chief assistant to William A. Brady, director general of the World Film Company. Then he entered the Signal Corps of the Army, serving as motion picture expert in Washington, D.C., during the war.

In the following years he became successively a film cutter, editor, writer, and assistant director, working with Lawrence Windom, Emile Chautard, Wallace Worsley, Roy William Neill, and others, in the United States and England.

Early in 1924 von Sternberg met George K. Arthur, a young English actor who had been having difficulty getting a start in Hollywood. Arthur had an idea for a comedy upon which he suggested von Sternberg collaborate. But von Sternberg countered this with a script called *The Salvation Hunters*, and soon sold Arthur on the idea of making it. Together they managed to raise enough money to begin:

## THE SALVATION HUNTERS (1925)

Released by United Artists, February 15, 1925.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. Original scenario by Josef von Sternberg. Photographed by Edward Gheiler. A Joseph von Sternberg Production released by Academy Pictures and distributed by United Artists.

### *Cast:*

*The Boy* — George K. Arthur

*The Girl* — Georgia Hale

*The Child* — Bruce Guerin

*The Man* — Otto Matieson

*The Woman* — Nellie Bly Baker

*The Brute* — Olaf Hytten

*The Gentleman* — Stuart Holmes

*Synopsis:* “Three derelicts live on a mud scow from which circumstances and environment release them after poetically conceived tribulations.” (J. v. S.)

Made for only \$4800, von Sternberg’s first directorial effort already gave ample evidence of his basic approach to film making, the approach that was to continue throughout his career. The simple story served as an outline in which the emphasis was placed on the revealing pictorial composition: in this case images used to heighten the atmosphere of sordidness in the environment of the characters. The “hero” of the film was a mud-dredging machine, whose shadow became a



psychological symbol, haunting the lives of the characters while everywhere one felt the mud, the filth, the ugliness of the young people's existence. It was one of the earliest fictional films with a documentary-like quality. The performance of Georgia Hale<sup>1</sup>, the leading lady, was especially singled out as being quite unusual in its lack of obvious gestures. Since the only "name" actor in the film, Stuart Holmes, charged one hundred dollars a day for his services, and the low budget would hardly allow for such extravagance, von Sternberg hired him for one day only—and the next day played his shadow. The major part of the film was photographed at the San Pedro, California mud flats. Upon the film's completion, George K. Arthur, with the help of Alfred Reeves, Chaplin's business manager, interested Chaplin in the venture. Chaplin saw it, officially sent out his hallowed approval of the film, and Douglas Fairbanks and Joseph Schenck proceeded to purchase part of it for twenty thousand dollars, for release through United Artists. Max Reinhardt said of it, "It is inconceivable that such cinematic greatness could have been achieved in America." Largely a *success d'estime*, it served to launch the directorial career of von Sternberg, bringing his talent to the attention of producing companies able to give him further work.

With his first film sold for distribution through United Artists, in October 1924, von Sternberg left for Pittsburgh under contract to Mary Pickford to write a story for her against the industrial background of that city. However, upon his return, Miss Pickford had a disagreement with him and supplanted him with Marshall Neilan as director for her next film. The Pittsburgh story was dropped.

Von Sternberg next went to M.G.M., where he had been previously contracted to go upon the expiration of the Pickford contract. There he made:

## THE EXQUISITE SINNER (1926)

Released by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, March 28, 1926. Directed by Josef von Sternberg. Based on the

novel by Alden Brooks. Adapted by Josef von Sternberg and Alice D. G. Miller. Photographed by Maximilian Fabian.

*Cast:*

*Dominique Prad* — Conrad Nagel

*The Gypsy Maid* — Renée Adoree

*Yvonne* — Paulette Duval

*Colonel* — Frank Currier

*Colonel's Orderly* — George K. Arthur

*The Gypsy Chief* — Mathew Betz

*Dominique's Sisters* — Helen D'Algy / Claire Dubrey

*Synopsis:* A wealthy boy runs away from home to be with the gypsies. His family and fiancée keep trying to get him to return, but he finally stays with a wild, rough gypsy girl.

In the version released this film was selected by the National Board of Review as one of the forty best pictures of 1926.

Von Sternberg's second film for M.G.M. was to have been *The Masked Bride*, starring Mae Murray. After the first few days' shooting, von Sternberg turned his camera to the ceiling, shot the rafters as a gesture of what he thought of his assignment, and walked off the set. The film's direction was given to Christy Cabanne, the von Sternberg-Metro contract was broken by mutual consent, and von Sternberg left for a vacation in Europe.

Upon his return he went under contract to Charles Chaplin to direct a film intended to bring Edna Purviance<sup>2</sup> out of retirement:

## THE SEA GULL (1926)

*(The Woman of the Sea)* Unreleased.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. Original screenplay by Josef von Sternberg. Photographed by Paul Ivano. Sets by Danny Hall. Produced by Charles Chaplin.

*Cast:*

Edna Purviance, Eve Southern, Gayne Whitman.

A simple, quadrangular love story served as the basis for this film in which the changing patterns of the sea were used for psychological and atmospheric underscoring of the action, photographed largely on the sea coast of Monterey, California. Paul Ivano became official first cameraman on this film, due to von Sternberg's confidence in his ability. Although the film was previewed once, in Beverly Hills, Chaplin decided, for reasons of his own, not to release it.

With a history of three relatively unsuccessful films behind him, the only position next offered to von Sternberg was that of assistant director to Arthur Rosson at Paramount. He accepted the job, and was next assigned to directing re-takes on Frank Lloyd's *Children of Divorce*. The success of these re-takes spurred B. P. Schulberg's confidence in him. Schulburg offered von Sternberg the direction of:

## UNDERWORLD (1927)

Released by Paramount, September 3, 1927.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. Original story by Ben Hecht. Adapted by Charles Furthman. Scenario by Robert N. Lee. Photographed by Bert Glennon. Sets by Hans Dreier. Titles by George Marion, Jr.

*Cast:*

"Rolls Royce" — Clive Brook

"Feathers" McCoy — Evelyn Brent

"Bull" Weed — George Bancroft

"Slippy" Lewis — Larry Semon

Buck Mulligan — Fred Kohler

Mulligan's Girl — Helen Lynch

Paloma — Jerry Mandy

*Synopsis:* Big-time gangster "Bull" Weed helps out drunkard

“Rolls Royce”, who falls in love with “Bull’s” girl “Feathers” McCoy.” When “Bull” kills his rival, Buck Mulligan, he goes to prison. “Rolls Royce” and “Feathers”, still loyal to “Bull”, engineer his escape, but there is a slip-up at the last minute. “Bull” escapes anyway, thinking they’ve double-crossed him. While cornered by the police in his hide-out, “Rolls Royce” and “Feathers” come to rescue him by a secret passageway. “Bull,” seeing that they really love each other, tells them to leave, and stays to fight it out.

One of the first and most popular of gangster films, *Underworld* served to establish the directorial abilities of von Sternberg on the sort of basis most respected in Hollywood: it became an enormous box-office success. Considered generally to be one of the best films of that year, the studio awarded it a \$10,000 bonus for being the most successful picture shown at the N.Y. Paramount Theatre during 1927. For the first time von Sternberg concentrated on making a commercial success; he brought to Ben Hecht’s tightly knit plot an excellent feeling for characterization, a strong sense of realism, and an economy of means in telling the story. The film emerged as a compact, taut melodrama. George Bancroft’s portrayal of the big-hearted gangster was outstanding. In 1927 the whole vernacular of gangsterism was new to the screen, and von Sternberg’s film was the most original and effective of the period.

During the next three years at Paramount von Sternberg directed five films, wrote an original story, *Street of Sin*, which was made into a film directed by Mauritz Stiller with Emil Jannings, and worked on the cutting of Erich von Stroheim’s *The Wedding March*.

## THE LAST COMMAND (1927–1928)

Released by Paramount, January 23, 1928.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. From an original story by von Sternberg, based on an incident told by Ernst Lubitsch to Lajos Biró. Scenario by John F. Goodrich. Sets by Hans Dreier. Photographed by

Bert Glennon. Titles by Herman J. Mankiewicz.

*Cast:*

*Sergius Alexander* — Emil Jannings

*Natacha* — Evelyn Brent

*Leo* — William Powell

*The Adjutant* — Nicholas Soussanin

*Serge, the Valet* — Michael Visaroff

*Synopsis:* Jannings, an ageing extra in Hollywood, is chosen to play the general in a battle scene. Actually, he is a former White Russian general, and in a flashback the story of his experience in the Russian revolution is told. In the end, the illusion that he is once again the powerful general is too much for him, and he dies while enacting a scene so reminiscent of his former triumphs.

*The Last Command* served primarily as a vehicle for the acting virtuosity of Emil Jannings, then at the height of his popularity. Here the director used the moving camera quite freely, particularly in the opening scenes at the studio, while the studio details contributing to a sense of reality and atmosphere were carefully worked out, with considerable pungent humor. Von Sternberg's increasing interest in woman as a sensual personality was apparent in his direction and photographic treatment of Evelyn Brent. This was the first film in which von Sternberg used rather frequently the slow lap-dissolve, a device which was to become a characteristic of the director's later films.

## THE DRAG NET (1928)

Released by Paramount, May 26, 1928.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. From the story, "Nightstick," by Oliver H. P. Garrett. Adaptation and screenplay by Jules Furthman. Photographed by Harold Rosson. Sets by Hans Dreier. Titles by Herman J. Mankiewicz.

*Cast:*

*"Two-Gun" Nolan* — George Bancroft

*"The Magpie"* — Evelyn Brent

*"Dapper" Frank Trent* — William Powell

*"Gabby" Steve* — Fred Kohler

*"Sniper" Dawson* — Francis McDonald

*Donovan* — Leslie Fenton

*Synopsis:* Detective Lieutenant "Two-Gun" Nolan is trying to run Trent's gang of hi-jackers out of town. Trent's moll, "Magpie", admires Nolan's strength and asks him to join the gang. He refuses. One night Nolan is called to a house to help out Donovan. He is fired at and just after he fires back Donovan's body falls at his feet. Under the impression that he has killed him, Nolan turns to drink, until "Magpie" arranges to let him hear Trent boast about the killing. In the ensuing fight, Nolan kills Trent and his gang wounds "Magpie". They get together in the hospital.

In this attempt to duplicate the success of *Underworld*, von Sternberg further demonstrated his unique ability to make a fast-moving melodramatic thriller. The story material of *The Drag Net* did not quite equal that of the previous film, and by the time it was released, the gangster theme had already begun to pall slightly. However, it was still a very successful film, evincing on the part of von Sternberg an extensive use of pictorial detail. Kohler's restaurant was an elaboration of the *Underworld* café, and Miss Brent appeared again in feathers, this time augmented with two-colored furs and a striking black and white skull-cap. A party sequence using much confetti and serpentine for effect was once again in evidence, and the cobwebbed tenement was a picturesque example of the director's feeling for the pictorial value of the sordid.

## THE DOCKS OF NEW YORK (1928)

Released by Paramount, September 29, 1928.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. From a story

suggested and adapted by Jules Furthman.  
Photographed by Harold Rosson. Sets by Hans  
Dreier. Titles by Julian Johnson.

*Cast:*

*Bill Roberts* — George Bancroft

*Sadie* — Betty Compson

*Lou* — Olga Baclanova

*"Sugar" Steve* — Clyde Cook

*Third Engineer* — Mitchell Lewis

*"Hymn Book" Harry* — Gustav von Seyffertitz

*Steve's Girl* — Lillian Worth

*Synopsis:* Bancroft, a simple coal-stoker, rescues a girl from suicide and as a drunken joke marries her. The next morning he is returning to the ship when he sees a crowd and police gathering. He returns to find the girl being arrested for shooting the third engineer, who has tried to force his attentions on her. The engineer's wife then confesses to the shooting and Bancroft once more leaves. On an impulse, he swims ashore to find his wife arrested for possessing stolen clothing. He confesses to the crime and is sentenced to sixty days. The girl, to whom the marriage means her chance for respectability, says she'll wait for him.

*The Docks of New York* again provided von Sternberg with a picturesque setting, and a group of colorful underworld characters. He made the most of the opportunities thus offered him, and brought forth one of his most totally effective silent films. For the first time since *The Sea Gull*, he concentrated strongly on the pictorial possibilities of his story; the fog, the glistening bodies of the stokers, the low-life settings, were rendered in a rich chiaroscuro. He had two new actresses to work with, Olga Baclanova and Betty Compson, and he used them in contrast to each other with the utmost effect. Baclanova, particularly, emerged as a striking filmic personality in a role which perfectly suited her. Bancroft gave his customary strong performance. The settings reminded one at times of *Greed*, but von Sternberg's soft-focus, rather caressing lighting lent them a glamour and feeling quite unlike von

Stroheim's harsh, bitter work.

## THE CASE OF LENA SMITH (1929)

Released by Paramount, January 19, 1929.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. From an original story. Screenplay by Jules Furthman. Photographed by Harold Rosson. Sets by Hans Dreier.

*Cast:*

*Lena Smith* — Esther Ralston

*Franz Hofrat* — James Hall

*Herr Hofrat* — Gustav von Seyffertitz

*Frau Hofrat* — Emily Fitzroy

*Stefan* — Fred Kohler

*Stefan's Sister* — Betty Aho

*Commissioner* — Lawrence Grant

*Janitor* — Alex Woloshin

*Janitor's Wife* — Ann Brody

*Synopsis:* With a prologue and epilogue laid during World War I, the main section of the story takes place in Vienna in 1894. A peasant girl goes from her native village to Vienna, where she secretly marries a profligate army officer, bears him a child, and becomes a servant in his father's home. When the father attempts to take her child she exposes him as a tyrant.

Made in the transitional period from silence to sound, *The Case of Lena Smith*, like certain other silent films at that time, was obscured in the furor created by the arrival of the new addition to the film medium; it failed to receive the attention that it deserved. Von Sternberg's ever-growing concentration on the pictorial gave the story a strongly atmospheric quality. The milieu of the Vienna of that period in which the story was laid was accurately, admirably captured. For the first time von Sternberg painted a dark set white for photographic purposes. Among the many beautiful sequences in the film, Lena's escape through the misty corn-fields stood out as an especially



beautiful study in light and shade. The moving camera was used effectively in several sequences; especially memorable was the director's use of a rushing camera movement to follow Lena's tumultuous arrival in the workhouse. The opening amusement park sequence, with its distorted mirror images and the beautifully lighted boat journey through the tunnel of horrors gave further evidence of von Sternberg's increasing pictorial mastery. Generally well received by more perceptive critics, *The Case of Lena Smith* may be regarded as von Sternberg's most successful attempt at combining a story of meaning and purpose with his very original style.

## THUNDERBOLT. (1929)

Released by Paramount, June 22, 1929.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. From an original story by Jules and Charles Furthman. Adapted by Charles Furthman. Dialogue by Herman J. Mankiewicz. Sets by Hans Dreier.

### *Cast:*

*"Thunderbolt"* — George Bancroft

*Bob Moran* — Richard Arlen

*"Ritzy"* — Fay Wray

*Warden* — Tully Marshall

*Mrs. Moran* — Eugenie Besserer

*"Snapper" O'Shea* — James Spottswood

*"Bad Al" Frieberg* — Fred Kohler

*"Kentucky" Sampson* — Mike Donlin

*Negro Convict* — S. S. Stewart

*Bank Officer* — George Irving

*Priest* — Robert Elliott

*Police Inspector* — William Thorne

*District Attorney* — E. H. Calvert

*Synopsis:* Learning that his girlfriend "Ritzy," is in love with honest young Bob Moran, "Thunderbolt," a notorious gangster, is on his way to kill the boy when he is arrested. Later,

“Thunderbolt’s” gang frame Moran on a murder charge, and he lands in a cell opposite “Thunderbolt.” Four hours before Moran is to go to the death chamber, “Thunderbolt” confesses that he framed him. “Thunderbolt” still plans his revenge by his intention to strangle the boy just before he himself goes to the death chamber, but he softens at the last moment with his hand an inch from the boy’s neck. The door of the execution chamber closes behind him.

In his first sound film von Sternberg once again directed George Bancroft in a tightly-knit gangster story. The last half of the film took place in the cell-block of a prison presided over by a neurotic warden, effectively played by Tully Marshall. The dialogue by Herman Mankiewicz was realistic, although there tended to be too much of it. Music was used only where it would naturally occur, in the “black-and-tan” café sequence, and as played by the jail quartet and band. This time von Sternberg was not inspired to pictorial virtuosity. This was von Sternberg’s last essay in the direction of his first great success *Underworld*, until ten years later, when he made *Sergeant Madden*.

Upon the completion of *Thunderbolt* von Sternberg left for Germany to make a film for UFA under the production guidance of Erich Pommer.<sup>4</sup> This was *The Blue Angel*, made in both English and German dialogue versions. The English version was not released in the United States until after von Sternberg’s later, American-made *Morocco*. Thus, Marlene Dietrich was first introduced to American audiences in *Morocco*, closely followed by:

## THE BLUE ANGEL (1930)

A UFA production. Released by Paramount, January 3, 1931.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. From the novel *Professor Unrat* by Heinrich Mann. Adapted by Carl Zuckmayer and Karl Vollmöller. Continuity by Robert Liebmann. Scenario: Liebmann and

Zuckmayer. Photographed by Günther Rittau and Hans Schneeberger. Sets by Otto Hunte. Music by Friedrich Hollander. Edited by Sam Winston. An Erich Pommer Production for UFA. Songs: "Nimm Dich In Acht Vor Blonden Frauen," "Ich Bin Von Kopf Bis Fuss Auf Liebe Eingestellt," "Ich Bin Die Fesche Lola," and "Kinder, Heut' Abend Such Ich Mir Was Aus." (Lyrics to songs by Robert Liebmann.)

*Cast:*

*Professor Immanuel Rath* — Emil Jannings

*Lola Frohlich* — Marlene Dietrich

*Kiepert, a Magician* — Kurt Gerron

*Guste, his Wife* — Rosa Valetti

*Mazeppa* — Hans Albers

*Principal of the School* — Eduard von Winterstein

*The Clown* — Reinhold Bernt

*The Beadle* — Hans Roth

*Angst (Scholar)* — Rolf Müller

*Lohmann (Scholar)* — Rolant Varno

*Ertzum (Scholar)* — Karl Balhaus

*Goldstaub (Scholar)* — Robert Klein-Loerk

*The Publican* — Karl Huszar-Puffy

*The Captain* — Wilhelm Diegelmann

*The Policeman* — Gerhard Bienert

*Synopsis:* A middle-aged school teacher, a strict disciplinarian, falls completely in love with a fetching cabaret singer whom his students have been sneaking away to see. It leads to his being dropped from the faculty, their marriage, and his reluctant selling of suggestive postcards of his wife in the café where she sings. During the next five years he descends to appearing as a clown, mimicking a rooster while eggs are smashed on his head. When the troupe plays the town in which he formerly taught he goes mad as he sees his wife in the wings in the arms of another man. Crowing like a rooster, he attempts to strangle her, but is restrained. Desperately, he stumbles back to his old schoolroom, the symbol of his former pride and

dignity as a man. There, embracing his old desk, he dies.

The novel, by Heinrich Mann (brother of Thomas Mann), upon which the picture was based, provided a character perfectly suited to the talents of Jannings; von Sternberg and his writers freely adapted the literary work to fit the director's filmic requirements. In his search for an actress to play the role of Lola, von Sternberg came across Marlene Dietrich appearing in a short comedy, Georg Kaiser's "Zwei Krawatten," on the stage of the Berliner Theatre. Although she had played previously in *Princess Ohala* (1927), *I Kiss Your Hand, Madame* (1928), and with Fritz Kortner in *The Ship of Lost Men* (1929), and Kurt Bernhardt's *Three Loves* (1929), she had not been particularly noticed, and she had more or less given up the idea of a film career. In an interview several years later Dietrich described this period: "Von Sternberg found me in Germany. I was nothing there. He believed in me, worked with me, trained me—he gave all his knowledge, experience, energy to make me a success . . . He made me over." And thus arrived one of the most outstanding film personalities ever to reach the screen. Not since Garbo had such a furor been created by the arrival of a new star. *The Blue Angel* was an immediate, international success, and Dietrich became world famous literally overnight. Featuring an extremely intelligent and imaginative use of sound when most pictures were still talky and stilted, *The Blue Angel* had numerous long passages without speech, and the music and songs blended easily with the continuity. The English language version cleverly established legitimate excuses for the use of a foreign language, as, of course, the members of the cast spoke with a German accent; Jannings played the role of an English professor who required that his pupils speak in English, and Dietrich was supposed to be British. Fully conscious of the atmospheric and dramatic value of carefully used natural sounds, von Sternberg effectively employed church-clock chimes, playing a popular German tune praising loyalty and honesty, to accompany the arrival of the professor each morning promptly at eight to his classroom. They are heard once again as an ironic note to accompany his ignoble and pitiful end. When Jannings stumbles through the snow during his final return to the schoolroom, an off-shore

foghorn of the port town sounds mournfully. Friedrich Hollander's songs contributed much; Dietrich's forceful rendition of the running theme, "Ich Bin Von Kopf Bin Fuss," astride a chair, was particularly memorable. The elaborate settings, usually small and loaded with detail, served to fill the screen continuously with dark, sensuous compositions. Reminiscent of the detail in von Stroheim's *Greed*, here the use of inanimate objects was much more stylized, giving one the feeling that reality had been acutely extended, projected imaginatively beyond its natural limits. Here was the first developed example of the unique von Sternbergian world that was to reach its high-point of realization five years later in *The Devil Is a Woman*.

## MOROCCO (1930)

Released by Paramount, December 1930.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. From the play "Amy Jolly" by Benno Vigny. Scenario and dialogue by Jules Furthman. Photographed by Lee Garmes. Edited by Sam Winston. Sets by Hans Dreier. Songs: "Give Me the Man" by Leo Robin and Karl Hajos, "What Am I Bid for My Apples?" by Robin and Hajos, "Quand L'Amour Meurt" by Crémieux.

### Cast:

*Tom Brown* — Gary Cooper

*Amy Jolly* — Marlene Dietrich

*La Bessiere* — Adolphe Menjou

*Adjutant Caesor* — Ullrich Haupt

*Anna Dolores* — Juliette Compton

*Corporal Tatoche* — Francis MacDonald

*Colonel Quinnevieres* — Albert Conti

*Mme. Caesar* — Eve Southern

*Lo Tinto* — Paul Porcasi

*Synopsis:* Amy Jolly, a café singer, falls in love with French Foreign Legionnaire Tom Brown. Wealthy La Bessiere also

proposes to Amy Jolly, and she accepts, when the young soldier goes off to rejoin his regiment. On the night of the dinner announcing their engagement, Amy Jolly hears the legionnaires returning from an expedition. She runs out to find Tom Brown and finally discovers him in an Arabian café; he pretends that he no longer cares for her and leaves. She then discovers her name carved into the table where he had been sitting. The next day, as the legionnaires leave once again for the desert, she follows with the little group of native women who make up the “rear guard,” those who follow their men despite all hardship.

Dietrich’s first American film once again displayed von Sternberg’s admirable ability to combine sound and image with the utmost effect. Throughout the film *only natural sounds were used*, psychologically and realistically to heighten the effect. The lack of background music in this and others of von Sternberg’s early sound films gave them a sharp, immediate quality; the director was able to sustain the emotional flow of a sequence without the use of music as a crutch. The staging of the two songs sung by Dietrich, one in English and the other in French, was particularly boldly handled. It is doubtful whether the actions accompanying the French song, with Dietrich dressed in a tuxedo, would pass the censors today; although, as in the case of many subtle intimations in the von Sternberg films of the early sound period, the vast majority would miss the import of the scene anyway. For the first time slatted shutters were used on the Moroccan sets, and in the majority of von Sternberg’s future films, whether the setting was laid in China, New Orleans, Russia, or Spain, these same slatted shutters and doors were to be seen. They became a very conscious pictorial device, used by the director in the creation of his particular filmic environments.<sup>5</sup> Again, there was a rich use of detail: the cluttered dressing room and apartment of Amy Jolly, the streets of Morocco filled with the complex light patterns made by the sunlight filtering through the overhanging vines and lattices. Using the lap-dissolve sparingly, von Sternberg achieved an extraordinarily evocative effect by dissolving both sound and image very slowly as in the transition from the hospital to the Arabian café. The perhaps overly-romantic story served its purpose; it provided a

smoothly flowing continuity in which the director's concern with the abstract considerations of film form became increasingly apparent.

## DISHONORED (1931)

Released by Paramount, April 4, 1931.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. Original story by

Josef von Sternberg. Screenplay by Daniel N. Rubin.

Photographed by Lee Garmes. Sets by Hans Dreier.

### *Cast:*

*X27* — Marlene Dietrich

*Lieutenant Kranau* — Victor McLaglen

*Colonel Kovrin* — Lew Cody

*Secret Service Head* — Gustav von Seyffertitz

*General von Hindau* — Warner Oland

*Young Lieutenant* — Barry Norton

*Court Officer* — Davison Clark

*Synopsis:* X27, a streetwalker employed by the Austrian government, unmasks a Russian spy, but he escapes. Later she recognizes Lieutenant Kranau, posing as an Austrian, as the escaped Russian spy, and she lays a trap for him but he escapes again. When she goes to Russia, disguised as a peasant, Kranau captures her and they fall in love. But she drugs him and escapes. When he is finally captured, she identifies him and asks to be allowed to speak to him alone. She then lets him escape, her love being greater than her dedication to her country. She is executed as a traitor.

For Dietrich's second American film von Sternberg wrote an original story, laid in his native Vienna. Pictorially, the film was an extension of his two previous works. Dietrich's Viennese apartment was cluttered with detail, and the actress herself appeared now in more elaborate costumes than before, featuring much veiling, feather boas and hats, monkey fur, etc. The headquarters of the Austrian secret service was made

picturesque by having an enormous table covered with test tubes and other chemical paraphernalia set in the center of the room. The star appeared in a number of different guises during the film; she wore heavy leather flying togs in the plane sequence, and as the peasant her face was shiny with no make-up. The costume ball,<sup>6</sup> in which von Sternberg once again used serpentine for its pictorial effect, was richly photographed, anticipating slightly the opening carnival sequence in *The Devil Is a Woman*. Music was sparingly but effectively used, as in the piano playing of Ivanovici's "Danube Waves," and slow lap-dissolves of both sound and images were increasingly in evidence. Victor McLaglen gave a fairly capable performance under von Sternberg's close direction, although he was actually rather miscast. In his stressing of the abstract visual elements of character and situation, von Sternberg has not always been successful in establishing the emotional relationship between two players. In this case the supposedly great affection between the two leading characters failed to be convincing enough to the audience to warrant the sacrifices they made. This lack of warmth gave the story a certain arbitrariness. There had been complaints from some critics that the highly romantic ending of *Morocco* strained credulity. The ending of *Dishonored*, while effective enough as a melodrama, was similarly romantic, with Dietrich pausing to rouge her lips while a love-crazed young lieutenant refused to issue the order to fire.<sup>7</sup>

## AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY (1931)

Released by Paramount, August 22, 1931.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. From the novel by Theodore Dreiser. Adaptation by von Sternberg and Samuel Hoffenstein. Screenplay by Samuel Hoffenstein. Photographed by Lee Garmes.

*Cast:*

*Clyde Griffiths* — Phillips Holmes

*Roberta Alden* — Sylvia Sydney

*Sondra Finchley* — Frances Dee



*Orville Mason* — Irving Pichel  
*Samuel Griffiths* — Frederick Burton  
*Mrs. Samuel Griffiths* — Claire McDowell  
*Gilbert Griffiths* — Wallace Middleton  
*Myra Griffiths* — Vivian Winston  
*Belknap* — Emmett Corrigan  
*Mrs. Asa Griffiths* — Lucille La Verne  
*Jephson* — Charles B. Middleton  
*Titus Alden* — Albert Hart  
*Mrs. Alden* — Fanny Midgely  
*Bella Griffiths* — Arline Judge  
*Bertine Cranston* — Evelyn Pierce  
*Judge* — Arnold Korff  
*Jill Trumbell* — Elizabeth Forrester  
*Coroner Fred Heit* — Russell Powell  
*Earl Newcomb* — Imboden Parrish  
*Deputy Sheriff Kraut* — Richard Cramer

*Synopsis:* Young Clyde Griffiths, from a poor family, is going with Roberta Alden when he meets rich girl Sondra Finchley. He wants to give up Roberta, but she is pregnant. Reading in the paper about a girl accidentally drowned while out boating, Clyde takes Roberta out in a boat with the intention of killing her. He decides not to do it, but she is accidentally drowned anyway. He is brought to trial and convicted of murder.

Von Sternberg's interpretation of Theodore Dreiser's long and exhaustive social novel was neither a critical nor popular success in the United States, although it was a great success in Europe. Dreiser sued Paramount for being unfaithful to the original, and lost the verdict. When Paramount first purchased the novel, Sergei Eisenstein had just arrived from Russia, and he was assigned to do a treatment on the story. If Eisenstein's remarkable treatment had been filmed, there would probably have been no complaints from anyone, except, perhaps, the exhibitors to whom the artistic film is box-office anathema, for his treatment was a faithful adaptation of the story to a dynamic film continuity. However, the Paramount officials decided to entrust the filming to a more reliable and tested

source, and so Samuel Hoffenstein, in collaboration with von Sternberg, wrote a new script. The complexities and social implications of the novel were only noted in passing, and von Sternberg gave the story a more factual interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

## SHANGHAI EXPRESS (1932)

Released by Paramount, February 12, 1932.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. Based on a story Harry Hervey. Screenplay by Jules Furthman. Gowns by Travis Banton. Photographed by Lee Garmes. Sets by Hans Dreier.

### *Cast:*

*Shanghai Lily* — Marlene Dietrich  
*Captain Donald Harvey* — Clive Brook  
*Hui Fei* — Anna May Wong  
*Henry Chang* — Warner Oland  
*Sam Salt* — Eugene Pallette  
*Mr. Carmichael* — Lawrence Grant  
*Mrs. Haggerty* — Louise Closser Hale  
*Eric Baum* — Gustav von Seyffertitz  
*Major Lenard* — Emile Chautard

*Synopsis:* On a train from Peiping to Shanghai, Shanghai Lily, notorious white prostitute, meets an old flame, Captain Harvey. The train is stopped by revolutionists led by Henry Chang, and Captain Harvey is held as a hostage. Shanghai Lily agrees to stay with Chang when he threatens to torture Harvey, but Chang is finally killed and the train continues its journey. Not knowing of her sacrifice, Harvey considers her desire to stay with Chang one more example of her faithlessness, until the train arrives in Shanghai and he learns the truth.

With *Shanghai Express*, von Sternberg turned out one of his greatest popular successes. Dietrich's popularity reached its peak with the release of this film. The relatively few characters involved were all meticulously etched, the settings were highly

atmospheric, and the whole produced a very pleasing unity of effect. Given the problem of making a train a dramatic and striking element in the film, von Sternberg painted an Asiatic style train white and used gold Chinese lettering on the sides. The Chinese setting was mainly established by including a sequence in which the train puffed out of Peiping, through an impossibly narrow street crowded with animals and people, while overhead hung hundreds of oriental banners.<sup>9</sup> The revolutionary headquarters was carefully designed to give von Sternberg ample and varying textures for photographic virtuosity. Seen once again were slatted doors and windows, overhead lattice-work, and a stairway and balcony which provided for various levels of action. The latter pictorial device was to be developed further. Natural sounds were used exclusively until the final sequence, which blossomed forth as a delightfully rhythmic, purely cinematic denouement. Upon the arrival of the train in Shanghai, a jazz score accompanied the debarkation of the various characters, and the eventual coming together of the two principals in their fade-out kiss. In her three previous films Miss Dietrich's legs had been so much in evidence that both critics and the public had begun to comment upon von Sternberg's obsession with them. In *Shanghai Express* she appeared in long skirts throughout. The actions and speeches of the two principals were unusually slow at times; they had obviously been "directed" to fit in with the measured tempo of the film. Of the innumerable striking photographic compositions in the film, two of the most memorable were the dark, net-draped room where Chang was stabbed by Hui Fei, and the long close-up of Dietrich's hands clasped in prayer. It is in this, the ability to suggest the inner emotional experience merely with a control of light and shadow, that von Sternberg excels.

## **BLONDE VENUS (1932)**

Released by Paramount, September 16, 1932.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. Screenplay by Jules Furthman and S. K. Lauren. Photographed by

Bert Glennon. Sets by Wiard Ihnen. Songs: "Hot Voodoo" and "You Little So and So" by Sam Coslow and Ralph Rainger. "I Couldn't Be Annoyed" by Leo Robin and Dick Whiting.

*Cast:*

*Helen Faraday* — Marlene Dietrich

*Edward Faraday* — Herbert Marshall

*Nick Townsend* — Cary Grant

*Johnny Faraday* — Dickie Moore

*Ben Smith* — Gene Morgan

*"Taxi Belle" Hooper* — Rita La Roy

*Dan O'Connor* — Robert Emmett O'Connor

*Detective Wilson* — Sidney Toler

*Synopsis:* Helen Faraday comes from the Berlin stage to the modest New York flat of her American husband, a research chemist whose health is in danger from radium poisoning. To provide money for a cure she becomes the mistress of wealthy Nick Townsend. Later her husband finds out and threatens to take their child. She then runs away with the child and goes from town to town, first as a cabaret singer, then as a prostitute, always leaving a few hours before the Missing Persons Bureau locates her. She finally returns her child to her husband, and then sinks deeper and deeper, eventually turning up in Paris, a music hall sensation. From Paris to New York and reconciliation.

There were several effective song sequences in this film, particularly the "Hot Voodoo" number, in which Dietrich wore a fantastic blond "fuzzy-wuzzy" wig, and emerged startlingly from the hairy ugliness of an ape-skin. As an increasingly exotic and visually striking beauty, Dietrich's loveliness had never before been so fully exploited by her director. Bert Glennon's photography was exceedingly rich. Some of the exteriors were taken by Paul Ivano. Perhaps the most notable aspect of this film was the revelation of a von Sternbergian America, a cinematic environment quite unlike the real country, somewhat European in feeling, but mostly a unique, imaginative projection of the thematic material at the director's disposal

(i.e., The South, a Flophouse, a Night Club, a Chemist's Apartment, etc.). The illogical ending, with Dietrich's sudden unexplained rise from a flophouse in the South to stardom in a Paris music hall robbed the already banal story of its final shred of credibility.

In November, 1932, von Sternberg left by American Clipper for the West Indies with photographer Paul Ivano to gather background shots for a proposed circus story to star Dietrich. Primarily searching for a hurricane to photograph, they were unsuccessful and von Sternberg left for an extended sojourn in Europe.

In July, 1933, Dietrich left for a vacation in France. Shortly afterward von Sternberg returned to the United States from Germany. Dietrich's contract called for more films, and von Sternberg was signed, upon Dietrich's request, once again to direct them. On October 12, 1933, a screenplay based on a diary of Catherine the Great was completed by Manuel Komroff. Dietrich returned from Europe and on October 23, 1933, shooting began on:

## THE SCARLET EMPRESS (1934)

Released by Paramount, September 7, 1934.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. Based on a diary of Catherine the Great. Screenplay by Manuel Komroff. Decorations by Hans Dreier and staff headed by Peter Ballbusch and Richard Kollorsz. Titles and effects by Gordon Jennings. Costumes by Travis Banton. Musical score based on Tchaikovsky and Mendelssohn arranged by John M. Leipold and W. Frank Harling. Photographed by Bert Glennon.

### *Cast:*

*Sophia Frederica/Catherine II* — Marlene Dietrich

*Count Alexei* — John Lodge

*Grand Duke Peter* — Sam Jaffe

*Empress Elizabeth* — Louise Dresser

*Catherine as a child* — Maria Sieber

*Prince August* — C. Aubrey Smith  
*Countess Elizabeth* — Ruthelma Stevens  
*Princess Johanna* — Olive Tell  
*Gregory Orloff* — Gavin Gordon  
*Lieut. Ovtzyn* — Jameson Thomas  
*Ivan Shuvolov* — Hans von Twardowski  
*Archimandrite Simeon Tevedovsky* — Davison Clark  
*Arch-Bishop* — Davison Clark

*Synopsis:* Sophia Frederica is brought from Germany to Russia to become the wife of the mad Grand Duke Peter. At first innocent and wondering, when she is married and plunged into the intrigue of the decadent court, she gradually hardens and, with the aid of some of the guards, overthrows the Grand Duke and triumphantly takes over the throne.

As if von Sternberg had suddenly decided to expend all his efforts toward an absolutely uncompromising development of his filmic theories, *The Scarlet Empress* emerged as a remarkable advance, aesthetically, over his previous films. He had always fought for independence and the freedom to follow his own wishes in making his films. Now in a position to do as he pleased, he took full advantage of it. Seen today, *The Scarlet Empress* has an almost unbelievable quality about it, for it is difficult to imagine any producer, especially in Hollywood, allowing such a film to be made. Despite any adverse criticism that may be directed toward it, and there has been a great deal, it remains one of the most completely unique experiences in the cinema repertoire, achieving an extraordinary visual impact. In designing the sets suggestive of the tremendous Peterhof Palace in the eighteenth century, von Sternberg used walls of logs as a background to twisted, anguished sculptures of saints and martyrs. Contrary to any number of speculations as to their symbolic meaning, these grotesque figures were merely intended as decorative art. Peter Ballbusch, a Swiss sculptor who later became the head of the montage department at M.G.M., executed, with the help of a large staff, two hundred individual statues in four weeks. Richard Kollorsz, a German painter, executed the icons and portraits in the Byzantine style.

Von Sternberg built his sets simply as visually suggestive backgrounds, rather than attempting to duplicate the true Peterhof Palace. Thus, the idea for the use of logs as the walls of the castle came when Hans Dreier discovered an old etching showing a Russian building of the period built of logs. With a number of log-covered flats, each new set was easily constructed by re-arranging the flats and adding a few statues. To achieve a quality of massiveness, von Sternberg made one huge door out of the customary tall double doors seen in palaces of the period, and their apparent heaviness was emphasized when several ladies-in-waiting could be seen employing all their strength to swing one of them open.

In form, *The Scarlet Empress* was an attempt to devise a pictorial movement having its counterpart only in a symphony. The various sequences of the film could be likened to a scherzo, a rondo, an andante, etc. In his by now all-engrossing concern with achieving his effects purely by visual means, von Sternberg resorted to titles to inform the audience of the actual historical progress of Catherine. Telling the story with speech was by now a lesser concern than ever before, and it was as if every once in a while the visual embellishments of the theme had to be interrupted to let the audience know what, exactly, was transpiring. However, once Catherine arrived at the palace, the titles became fewer, and the events of Catherine's gradual development from an innocent young girl into a shrewd and worldly woman were told almost entirely in a breathtakingly beautiful sequence of magnificent photographs. The memorable Russian Orthodox wedding ceremony was executed with a marvelous feeling for the barbaric and fantastic quality of ritual. In his masterful uniting of photography, music, and rhythmic cutting, von Sternberg achieved an extraordinary totality of effect. That this and the rest of the film was entirely the product of one man's creative control over the multiple crafts that go into filmmaking becomes evident when one sees the scenario from which the film was shot. In it there is no hint of the final film; only a small amount of Komroff's dialogue, and the general continuity of events were followed. Filled with detail, one remembers the cabinet filled with clocks, the locket falling from branch to branch of the barren tree, the crazy Duke boring holes in the wall of his wife's bedroom to peek in

at her, Catherine blowing out the candles in her room, Catherine, achieving motherhood in her huge bed toying with a piece of veiling, and finally the stirring climax with Catherine riding with her horsemen *through the castle* to claim her throne. Much of the picture became a sort of hymn to the visual loveliness of Miss Dietrich. All this fantastic splendor became overpowering; at times the actors seemed quite lost. The critics said that the actors were unable to compete with the settings. Although this may be partially true, both Dietrich and her leading man, John Lodge, in his first important role, emerged rather strongly in the almost completely stylized manner of their performances. Dietrich played the young Empress with wide eyes, mouth slightly open, little make-up. As she grew increasingly cynical her actions changed tempo to fit her developing character. It appeared that an attempt had been made, not always successful, to augment the nightmarish quality of the settings with the stylized performances of the actors. Although von Sternberg had more or less tried this before, at no time had he been more completely justified or successful. Sam Jaffe, in his first film, recently arrived from playing Kringelein in the Broadway production of "Grand Hotel," gave an excellent portrayal of the mad Duke, well in keeping with the atmosphere of the whole, although he reminded many too much of Harpo Marx, with his pop-eyes and tousled blond hair. Louise Dresser seemed miscast as the Empress Elizabeth. Her voice introduced a jarring note to the whole. As one reviewer commented, "she sounded like a fish-wife calling out her wares amid a group of quiet, cultured Europeans," but this was the effect von Sternberg desired. Mention should be made of the careful integration of film rhythm and the musical score which ran throughout the film. At many moments it gave the impression of being a film dance, so abstract and rhythmic were many of the sequences. Perversely, *The Scarlet Empress* was released to cold critical reception. It has been rumored that Paramount never made back the negative cost.

The next vehicle chosen for Dietrich was Pierre Lout's "Femme et le Pantin," a story which had been made into a film once before in 1920 with Geraldine Farrar and Lou Tellegen. Von Sternberg at first called his film "Caprice Espagnol." The



title was finally changed by Ernst Lubitsch, then production head of Paramount, to:

## THE DEVIL IS A WOMAN (1935)

Released by Paramount, May 3, 1935.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. Adapted for the screen by John Dos Passos. From the story "Woman and Puppet" by Pierre Lout's. Continuity by Sam Winston. Music by Ralph Rainger and Andrea Setaro. Lyrics by Leo Robin. Costumes by Travis Banton. Art Direction by Hans Dreier. Photographed by Josef von Sternberg, assisted by Lucien Ballard. Song: "Three Sweethearts Have I" by Leo Robin and Ralph Rainger.

### *Cast:*

*"Concha" Perez* — Marlene Dietrich

*Don Pasqual* — Lionel Atwill

*Antonio Galvan* — Cesar Romero

*Don Paquito* — Edward Everett Horton

*Senora Perez* — Alison Skipworth

*Morenito* — Don Alvarado

*Dr. Mendez* — Morgan Wallace

*Tuerta* — Tempe Pigott

*Maria* — Jill Dennett

*Conductor* — Lawrence Grant

*Letter Writer* — Charles Sellon

*Gypsy Dancer* — Luisa Espinel

*Foreman Snowbound Train* — Hank Mann

*Superintendent Tobacco Factory* — Edwin Maxwell

*Synopsis:* During carnival time in Seville, Antonio, looking for a woman with whom to spend his time, sees Concha riding in a carriage. He throws her a note and an assignation is arranged. Before he goes to see her he meets Don Pasqual; when Antonio mentions Concha, Don Pasqual warns him that she is a dangerous woman, and has ruined him. He tells about how he

met her, how he has been a slave to her ever since, and how she has been continually unfaithful. However Antonio goes to see her anyway, and later when Don Pasqual finds them together a duel is precipitated. Don Pasqual is wounded, and Antonio asks Concha to go to Paris with him. At the last moment, Concha returns to Don Pasqual.

It seemed inevitable that as long as von Sternberg continued to direct Marlene Dietrich he should turn one day to the work of the erotic writer Pierre Louÿs for material upon which to base a film. In Louÿs' "Femme et le Pantin" he found a leading character and a sequence of events perfectly suited to the talents of Dietrich and his exotic style of filming. Following the first part of the original almost exactly, Dos Passos' scenario elaborated on the theme during the last half of the story, providing a great wealth of incident for the film. The denouement devised by von Sternberg, in which the suspense was artfully maintained until the last possible moment, remains one of the most sardonic and insidious ever to be put on film. During its making von Sternberg stated: "We have progressed as far as possible together. My being with Miss Dietrich any further will not help either her or me. If we continued we would get into a pattern which would be harmful to both of us." Although it was announced that von Sternberg was attempting to duplicate in *The Devil Is a Woman* some of the qualities of his earlier films that had made them so successful with the public, he actually carried his experiments with visual abstraction to an even further point of development than in *The Scarlet Empress*. The only element that could be likened to the popular features of his earlier work were two song sequences, one of which was cut out just before the film's release. In *The Scarlet Empress* the story line had been carried along by explanatory titles. In his new film the main part of the story was narrated, in flashback, by Don Pasqual, as in the Pierre Louÿs original. It assumed its own momentum finally when the story of Concha reached the present moment in the life of the narrator and his listener. In one of the few successful examples of flash-back film narrative, von Sternberg was once again free to embellish pictorial incident; each sequence was carefully designed, each camera set-up perfectly lighted and composed.

Dietrich, in a strikingly new characterization, totally dissimilar to her "Catherine" in the previous film, appeared more beautiful than ever in the lavish Spanish costumes designed for her by Travis Banton. In a performance again highly stylized, the sadistic nature of Concha was brilliantly conveyed. Lionel Atwill stood out as her aging lover, contributing a subtle, well-balanced portrayal, in perfect contrast to the dynamic personality of his *vis-a-vis*. Cesar Romero, in a part primarily requiring a handsome appearance, registered effectively in one of his first large roles. Joel McCrea, originally cast as "Antonio," walked out after a few days' shooting, announcing that all the spontaneity was being directed out of him. Edward Everett Horton provided almost the only humor in the film with his customary comic skill. His portrayal was carefully integrated into the structure of the story.

So often in the case of films of a serious nature, when it is felt that a certain amount of "comedy relief" must be provided, the character added to furnish the humor is a completely extraneous element, injurious and often rather embarrassing to the work as a whole. Von Sternberg throughout his career has largely avoided this pitfall. At times, however, his oblique and highly individual sense of humor has not impressed itself very well on film (i.e., the bartender in *Shanghai Gesture*, and certain vagaries of humor in *The Scarlet Empress*).

The Spanish settings were outstanding examples of studio craftsmanship. Hans Dreier had always collaborated very sympathetically with von Sternberg, assisting the director greatly in the exact realization of his aims. In *The Devil Is a Woman* an imaginary Spain was constructed expressly for von Sternberg's camera; here the slatted shutters, which had first been used in *Morocco*, appeared once again, carefully worked into the colorful reconstruction of a Spanish town at the turn of the century. Painting the sets white allowed von Sternberg to splash light and shadow here and there at his will. Using lattices and nets and various other devices to achieve varying patterns of light, almost every shot in the picture had an individual distinction. The tobacco factory and café made brilliant use of various stair and balcony levels for pictorial effect, and the early train was filled with evocative detail. The musical score employed Rimsky-Korsakov's "Caprice Espagnol"

as thematic material; the rhythmic qualities of the film were carefully integrated with the music. An example of von Sternberg's now more frequent attempts to abstract the film from its human element could be seen in his use of elaborate full-faced masks of goats, dwarfs, devils, etc., in the opening carnival sequence.

*The Devil Is a Woman* received a critical reception even colder than that accorded to *The Scarlet Empress*, although all remarked about its great physical beauty. Approximately five months after it had been released, word was received that the Spanish government objected to the film on the grounds that it portrayed the Civil Guard as a subject for comedy. On October 31, 1935, the Spanish Minister of War, Gil-Robles, announced that all Paramount films would be barred from Spain unless *The Devil Is a Woman* was withdrawn immediately from world circulation. The matter then went into the hands of the U.S. State Department, and by November 12th, they concluded negotiations for Paramount to fulfill its existing contracts for the film and withdraw it. A commercial treaty being planned at the time between the United States and Spain was rumored as the reason for the quick capitulation to the unreasonable demands. 10 Entitled "Susceptibilité Excessive," an article in *Intercine* commented, "L'Espace de von Sternberg n'était et n'a jamais été l'Espace: c'était un pays imaginaire, un pays de conte, une espèce de paradis artificiel et romantique peuplé des fantômes carnavalesques et d'amours impossibles ... Pourquoi ce féroce autodafé? ..."

Von Sternberg next went to Columbia where B. P. Schulberg had gone earlier. There he once again directed under Schulberg's production guidance:

## CRIME AND PUNISHMENT (1935)

Released by Columbia. November 20, 1935.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. From the novel by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Screenplay by S. K. Lauren and Joseph Anthony. Photographed by Lucien Ballard. Music by Louis Silvers. Art Direction by Stephen

Goosson. Costumes by Murray Mayer. Edited by Richard Calhoon. Produced by B. P. Schulburg.

*Cast:*

*Inspector Porfiry* — Edward Arnold

*Raskolnikov* — Peter Lorre

*Sonya* — Marian Marsh

*Antonya* — Tala Birell

*Mrs. Raskolnikov* — Elisabeth Risdon

*Dmitri* — Robert Allen

*Grilov* — Douglass Dumbrille

*Lushin* — Gene Lockhart

*The University President* — Charles Waldron

*The Editor* — Thurston Hall

*The Clerk* — Johnny Arthur

*The Pawnbroker* — Mrs. Patrick Campbell

*Landlady* — Rafaelo Ottiano

*Painter Prisoner* — Michael Mark

*Synopsis:* Raskolnikov a poor student, owing rent, worried lest his sister marry for money, seeks to pawn his watch. He finds that the pawnbroker's greed is forcing a young girl into the streets; seeing this, all his growing resentment is suddenly centered upon the pawnbroker. He murders him, and another is accused of the crime. Immediately afterwards he becomes successful, and earns money from his writing; his crime appears pitifully unnecessary now, and his conscience finally impels him to confess.

Von Sternberg's second attempt to adapt a well-known literary work to the screen proved more successful than his first; although his treatment still suffered in comparison to the tortured original, the film itself turned out to be more successful, more suggestive of Dostoyevsky's novel than his attempt to bring Dreiser's work to the screen. Most of the inner complexities of the novel were removed in the screen adaptation of *Crime and Punishment*; what resulted was a clever murder melodrama, with most of the burden for giving the character of Raskolnikov the significance of the original resting upon the performance of Peter Lorre. Certain redundancies and

discrepancies were apparent, faults mostly inherent in the script. There were moments when Lorre seemed unlikely to have come from the same family as his sister and mother, so different from them did he seem. Marian Marsh bore a definite resemblance to Dietrich, especially in the manner of her performance. Comparison with the French film version of the story (directed by Pierre Chenal with Pierre Blanchar), released at the same time, were inevitable. Most critics seemed to prefer the French adaptation as more accurately capturing the spirit of the original, although there were exceptions. The settings of von Sternberg's film were once again carefully designed, with slatted shutters and much textural detail. Von Sternberg completed shooting *Crime and Punishment* in the remarkably short time of only twenty-eight days.<sup>11</sup> Always desiring to keep as many possible of the elements of film production under his immediate control, he demonstrated during the filming how much more quickly he could arrange a camera set-up, the lighting, and then direct the scene without a division of the labor involved. His efforts were timed, and he successfully proved his point. The Hollywood trade papers generally praised von Sternberg's excellent and judicious direction, while one commented, with *The Devil Is a Woman* and *The Scarlet Empress* still fresh in his mind, "He has become a director again."

## THE KING STEPS OUT (1936)

Released by Columbia, May 15, 1936.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. From the operetta "Cissy" by Hubert and Ernst Marischka based on the play "Cissy" by Ernst Decsey and Gustav Hohn. Screenplay by Sidney Buchman. Photographed by Lucien Ballard. Music by Fritz Kreisler. Lyrics by Dorothy Fields. Musical score by Howard Jackson. Art Direction by Stephen Goosson. Ballet by Albertina Rasch. Costumes by Ernst Dryden. Associate Director: Wilhelm Thiele. Produced by William Perlberg.

*Cast:*

*Cissy* — Grace Moore

*Franz Josef* — Franchot Tone

*Maximilian* — Walter Connolly

*von Kempen* — Raymond Walburn

*Palfi* — Victor Jory

*Sofia* — Elisabeth Risdon

*Louise* — Nana Bryant

*Helena* — Frieda Inescourt

*Major* — Thurston Hall

*Pretzelberger* — Herman Bing

*Herlicka* — George Hassell

*Chief of Secret Police* — Johnny Arthur

*Synopsis:* The young Emperor Franz Josef is betrothed to a princess. The princess' sister, disguised as a commoner, meets him one day and they fall in love. Through a ruse in identity brought about by the girl's father, true love finds a way.

One of Grace Moore's last films in Hollywood, *The King Steps Out* failed to live up to the precedent set previously by her very successful *One Night of Love*. The latter was a series of songs held together by a slight story; von Sternberg's film turned out to be a story with songs rather awkwardly added. Von Sternberg had seen the original production of Franz Kreisler's "Cissy" in Vienna, and was assigned to bring Miss Moore and Kreisler's music together in a film version. She reported later in her autobiography that she did not believe he knew what he was doing. Von Sternberg nevertheless managed to produce a handsomely mounted and artfully paced musical, in which the artificiality of the settings and characters contributed to a total effect of charming, romantic unreality. The interiors were mostly snow-white, the costumes colorful, and the trees, as in the case of *The Scarlet Empress*, were painted with aluminum again. Von Sternberg had the directorial collaboration of the Viennese Wilhelm Thiele, who had achieved fame with his direction of the popular German musical, *Drei von der Tankstelle*. Critics generally commented on Miss Moore's graceful emergence as a comedienne under von Sternberg's

able direction, although a few (including von Sternberg) found her rather uneasy in the role. The story, based on the life of Elizabeth of Austria, seemed to have little to distinguish it from most operetta plots, and the characters were largely stereotyped. Walter Connolly, in his portrayal of the impoverished and beer-loving Bavarian duke, gave the most effective and memorable performance, while Herman Bing contributed a considerable amount of his special brand of comedy.

Upon the expiration of his contract with Columbia, late in 1936, von Sternberg left for England to make a film for Alexander Korda:

## I, CLAUDIUS (1936)

Unfinished.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. Photographed by Georges Périnal. Art Direction by Vincent Korda. From the novel *I, Claudius* by Robert Graves. Produced by Alexander Korda.

*Cast:*

Charles Laughton, Merle Oberon, Flora Robson, Robert Newton.

The reason officially announced for disbanding the production was an automobile accident sustained by Merle Oberon. <sup>12</sup>

While in England von Sternberg began preparations to make a film version of Zola's *Germinal* (which Pudovkin had also once planned to do), but this was abandoned when von Sternberg contracted a serious illness and he returned to the United States. At this time he was also offered a post by the Austrian government to direct the government's department of fine arts, but the advent of Hitler's *Anschluss* with Austria made it impossible for him to accept.

In October, 1938, von Sternberg was contracted by M.G.M. on a one-picture agreement to direct a story entitled "New York Cinderella," intended as Hedy Lamarr's second American film.



From an original by Charles MacArthur, the film was to costar Spencer Tracy and Walter Pidgeon, and was photographed by Harold Rosson. After her sensational debut in *Algiers*, the American version of Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko*, which she made on loan-out to another studio, Hedy Lamarr proved to be M.G.M.'s greatest headache. They weren't quite sure what to do with her. Von Sternberg was probably chosen to direct her because of his memorable handling of Dietrich, and it is assuredly fascinating to consider how he might have treated the woman generally considered to be the most beautiful and exotic film personality since Dietrich. However, after only eighteen days of shooting, von Sternberg was removed because of a disagreement with production heads as to the manner in which the film was to be treated. Frank Borzage was hastily called in to replace von Sternberg and shooting continued; the title was then changed to *I Take This Woman*. When Borzage completed the film it was shelved. Finally, it was once again re-shot by W. S. Van Dyke, II, and released on February 2, 1940.

Meanwhile von Sternberg had completed his one-picture contract with M.G.M. by directing:

## **SERGEANT MADDEN (1939)**

Released by M.G.M., March 24, 1939.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. Based on the story "A Gun In His Hand" by William A. Ulman. Screenplay by Wells Root. Photographed by John Seitz. Art Direction by Cedric Gibbons and Randall Duell. Montage effects by Peter Ballbusch. Music by Dr. William Axt. Produced by J. Walter Ruben.

### *Cast:*

*Shaun Madden* — Wallace Beery

*Al Boylan, Jr.* — Tom Brown

*Dennis Madden* — Alan Curtis

*Eileen Daly* — Laraine Day

*Mary Madden* — Fay Holden

"*Piggy*" *Ceders* — Marc Lawrence

*Charlotte* — Marion Martin  
“*Punchy*” — David Gorcey

*Synopsis:* Shaun Madden’s son, overly anxious to distinguish himself in the same occupation as his father, resorts too readily to the use of firearms. A vengeful gangster frames the boy, and his father resigns from the force in shame. When the son escapes from a train bound for Sing Sing, he takes up a lifetime of crime. Finally, in ultimate contrition, he permits himself to be killed by police bullets in order that his father, wife, and newborn child may be saved from further disgrace.

For the first time in ten years, von Sternberg returned to the milieu of his first great box-office success, *Underworld*. He treated *Sergeant Madden* with the same economy and simplicity that had characterized the earlier work, and turned out an able, if not particularly distinguished, film. Most noteworthy was von Sternberg’s directorial handling of Wallace Beery, an actor long noted for his smirking facial contortions when faced with an embarrassing or dramatic moment; in this, his annoying personal characteristics were subjugated to a refreshing character portrayal in a serious vein. In her first film, Laraine Day displayed talent and charm, registering quite effectively as the young wife. After a rather slow start, devoted to establishing the characters and background, the picture speeded up to a fast-moving, melodramatic finish. Pictorially the film had little to indicate the director’s former concern with sensuous patterns of light and shadow; but here his subject matter impeded him to a more matter-of-fact treatment. <sup>13</sup>

In 1941, after a period of inactivity, Arnold Pressburger, a European film producer recently arrived as a refugee from France, contracted von Sternberg to direct the first film version of John Colton’s lurid fifteen-year-old play:

## THE SHANGHAI GESTURE (1941)

Released by United Artists, February 6, 1942.

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. From the play by

John Colton. Adapted by Josef von Sternberg in collaboration with Geza Herczeg, Karl Vollmöller and Jules Furthman. Photographed by Paul Ivano. Art Direction by Boris Leven. Set Decorations by Howard Bristol. Murals by Keye Luke. Edited by Sam Winston. Miss Munson's costumes by Royer. Miss Tierney's costumes by Oleg Cassini. Wigs by Hazel Rogers. Music by Richard Hageman. Associate Producer: Albert de Courville. Produced by Arnold Pressburger.

*Cast:*

*Poppy* — Gene Tierney  
*Sir Guy Charteris* — Walter Huston  
*Doctor Omar* — Victor Mature  
*"Mother" Gin Sling* — Ona Munson  
*Chorus Girl (Dixie Pomeroy)* — Phyllis Brooks  
*The Commissioner* — Albert Basserman  
*The Amah* — Maria Ouspenskaya  
*The Bookkeeper* — Eric Blore  
*The Gambler* — Ivan Lebedeff  
*The Coolie* — Mike Mazurki  
*The Comprador* — Clyde Fillmore  
*Counselor Brooks* — Rex Evans  
*The Social Leader* — Grayce Hampton  
*The Bartender* — Michael Delmatoff  
*The Croupier* — Marcel Dalio  
*The Cashier* — Mikhail Rasumny  
*The Escort* — John Abbott

*Synopsis:* Mother Gin Sling, Chinese head of a magnificent gambling casino in Shanghai, is about to be dispossessed by Sir Guy Charteris, whom she discovers was once her husband, who deserted her years before. She plans her long awaited revenge by giving a dinner party in his honor, in which she reveals his daughter, Poppy, to be in a state of moral degeneration. To Mother Gin Sling's surprise, Sir Guy informs her that Poppy is *their* daughter. Poppy denounces her mother, who then kills her in disgust.

Arnold Pressburger is credited with thinking first of a manner in which this well-known old shocker, which had served as a starring vehicle for both Florence Reed and Mrs. Leslie Carter on the stage, might be brought to the screen without being banned by the Hays Office. For years even the title had been forbidden by the Hollywood self-censorship organization. The house of ill-repute in the original was changed to a gambling establishment, Mother Goddam's name was changed to "Gin Sling," and she was now formerly "married" to Sir Guy, and all the intimations that Poppy was a dope-fiend were removed. Though von Sternberg and several of his former writers collaborated on the shooting script, the addition of the character of Doctor Omar was, of course, von Sternberg's idea. For the first time a male character similar to his female exotics was developed by von Sternberg. The role of this Levantine sensualist of shady origins was admirably portrayed by Victor Mature under von Sternberg's close direction; the casting proved to be quite perfect. One remembers devices used to establish the nature of Dr. Omar, particularly the scene in which he is discovered reading, sunken luxuriously amid an enormous pile of pillows. The other members of the cast fit into the story perfectly; they all seemed to relish their colorful roles. Ona Munson, fresh from her success as Belle Watling in *Gone With The Wind*, managed effectively to suggest much of the bitterness of Mother Gin Sling. Gene Tierney, in one of her earliest starring roles, has seldom looked more beautiful, nor acted better than under von Sternberg's guidance in a demanding role. Veteran character actors Walter Huston and Albert Basserman were themselves, and Phyllis Brooks gave a perfect portrayal of the chorus girl from Flatbush, another addition to the original.

Pictorially *The Shanghai Gesture* was one of von Sternberg's most interesting efforts. The richly atmospheric opening in the Chinese street reminded one, inevitably, of *Shanghai Express*. In the modern Chinese setting of the casino a new striving toward simplicity was apparent. The main action of the film, photographed against this background, proved to be an unusually beautiful study in contrasting chiaroscuro. The close-ups of the actors, often against a plain white background with, at the most, one Oriental vase or bas-relief visible, achieved at

times an effect of studied isolation. Miss Munson's elaborate Chinese wigs appeared to particular advantage in the close-ups, with their bringing-to-mind Medusa's coils. As a unified whole the film suffered from too much dialogue. Nevertheless, von Sternberg managed surprisingly well to imbue the continuity with a considerable amount of purely filmic movement. Particularly effective were several of the more dramatic scenes played to a definite rhythm in a stylized manner. The constant return to the huge roulette table in the center of the circular casino, giving the effect of being a descent into a maelstrom of iniquity, served as a suggestive pictorial leitmotif throughout the film. If the film seemed a little "old-fashioned" to many in 1941, it was only by comparison with the stereotyped nature of the majority of films contemporaneous to it; the individual statement seemed like an anachronism. Withal, the film was a financial success.

During the war von Sternberg was engaged by the Office of War Information to make a documentary film for distribution overseas:

## **THE TOWN (1943–1944)**

Directed by Josef von Sternberg. Written by Joseph Krumgold. Photographed by Larry Madison. Philip Dunne in charge of production for the United States Office of War Information. *The Town*: Madison, Indiana.

This short, one-reel documentary attempted to show the many elements that go into the making of a typical, democratic American town. The influence of von Sternberg was mostly noticeable in several of the photographic compositions, and in the lighting of some of the interiors, which emerged rather distinctively, standing apart from the more ordinary quality of the whole. Von Sternberg later commented that a documentary film apparently had to avoid good lighting even when it was there waiting for the director, as it had been established that a

documentary had to be completely “sober,” a factor originally resulting from the restrictive conditions under which the documentarist is most often forced to work. The latter is particularly applicable to most documentary interior photography (documentary exterior photography, on the contrary, has most often been extremely artful, especially in those works wherein lyrical qualities predominate<sup>14</sup>), usually accomplished without the complex but controllable lighting equipment of the studio. Regarded as a whole, the main fault with *The Town* was that it attempted to show too much in its short length, and thus suffered from a lack of intimacy and closeness to its subject, although the fact that the film was released in a shortened version undoubtedly contributed to this.

In 1946 von Sternberg acted as photographic consultant to David O. Selznick on his production of *Duel in the Sun*. During the early part of 1947 von Sternberg taught a first semester class in film direction (theoretical) at the Cinema Department of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. In 1948 he left Hollywood for New York.

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“The silent film was the only international language . . . . The grafting of dialogue to the film balked efforts to internationalize the people via the screen. . . . I am planning a new film, a re-statement of the idea to show what constitutes national differences and how peoples can be fused by a common understanding of each other. It will be a serious subject, my greatest effort, though I expect it will be a thankless job. Still, as far as film goes, I am determined to pierce through its piffle with this attempt. Films can be made cheaply . . . the idea is to ‘trick the eye’ . . . as painters do. Expensive details aren’t any more necessary in film than details are in painting....

“Though my films have been, and still are, studied by directors here and abroad, I regard them only as reasonably arrogant gestures of mine. They were very often only protests against other films of the time. . . . Frequently they were attempts to investigate techniques which might broaden their

appeal. They don't carry my endorsement, they only carry my name. None of them, save *The Salvation Hunters*, my first film, were sincere works of art ... I hope that my new film will be my maturest work by far. At any rate, I hope it will have nothing to do with any work I have done before."

— JOSEF VON STERNBERG,

in an interview with Herman G. Weinberg, July, 1948.

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1. Miss Hale's first film. She later became Chaplin's leading lady in *The Gold Rush*.

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2. Chaplin's leading lady in many of his early comedies, and the star of the comedian's one serious directorial effort, *A Woman of Paris*.

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3. Then production head of Paramount Pictures.

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4. "This was at the request of Emil Jannings who wanted von Sternberg to direct his first sound-film in Germany. It was to have been about Rasputin, but von Sternberg did not care for the subject and there were legal complications, so Jannings suggested Heinrich Mann's *Professor Unrat*. Only the first two-thirds of the story were used. (In the original, the Professor goes on to become an important social figure, despite his experience with Lola.)" — H.G.W.

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5. "Von Sternberg was asked by the Pasha of Marrakech in Cannes when he (von Sternberg) was in Morocco shooting the film, as the Pasha could not recall the filming of the picture there. When von Sternberg told him that the film was shot entirely in California, the Pasha was amazed at the veracity of the Moroccan atmosphere in the film. Sternberg had never been to Morocco.

"All of Sternberg's films, whether set in Africa, Russia, China or Spain, are *evocations* of those places, rather than realistic pictures of those locales. This was done intentionally, as an impressionist painter does the same thing intentionally." — H.G.W.

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6. "The costume ball gave an impression of hundreds of merry-makers when, as a matter of fact, there were ten extras used for this scene. Von Sternberg cleverly employed hundreds of balloons and serpentine streamers to give an illusion of a crowded ballroom." — H.G.W.

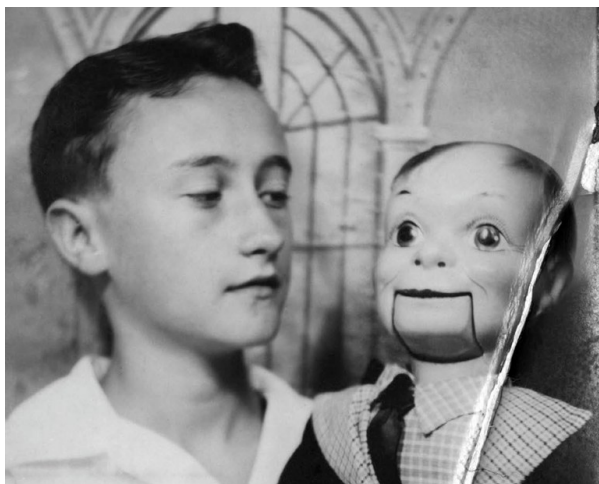
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7. "Some of the greatest love poems ever written are idiotic when analyzed in the light of truth and realism. It's the poetry that counts." — H.G.W.  
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8. "Von Sternberg, in conversations with Dreiser, told him that he was not interested in the so-called social implication of Dreiser's story as he did not believe in it. A young man, even from a better environment than Clyde Griffiths', could conceivably get himself into the same difficulty. Besides, to retain Dreiser's implications could be to blame religion and missionary workers for murder.  
"During this period, Eisenstein and von Sternberg were close friends." — H.G.W.  
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9. "Von Sternberg was told he'd be arrested if he ever went to China after making this film. When he did go to China, shortly afterwards, he was warmly received.  
"He had never been to China before making *Shanghai Express*, and was uninterested in a 'realistic China.' He wanted only to *evoke* China on the screen in deft, brief strokes." — H.G.W.  
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10. "The negative was burned, though several prints still exist. Sternberg mentions that he saw *The Devil Is a Woman* at a private screening, fairly recently.  
"With the exception of *The Salvation Hunters*, still his favorite film, he regards *The Devil Is a Woman* as the most completely realized of his works, although he was dissatisfied with them all. Viviane Romance is scheduled to play Concha in a forthcoming French version of *Woman and Puppet*." —H.G.W.  
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11. "There's nothing remarkable about it. I don't like to shoot a long time." — J.v.S.  
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12. "As for *Claudius*, I had great difficulty in managing Laughton; so did Korda; and when Oberon had a bad concussion in an auto accident, which meant so much delay that all our preparations and contracts were invalidated, it was decided to halt the film. It might have been my most successful film. There was no other reason." —J. v. S.  
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13. "Von Sternberg doesn't think very much of this opus, to put it mildly." — H.G.W.  
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14. *Vide*, Flaherty's films.  
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Curtis Harrington, approximately two years of age, circa 1928.



Dabbling in ventriloquism, late 1930s.



Scene from *Fall of the House of Usher*, Harrington's directorial debut, made in high school around 1940.



With his parents on high school graduation day, 1943.



Still from *A Fragment of Seeking*, 1946.



Curtis Harrington, date unknown.



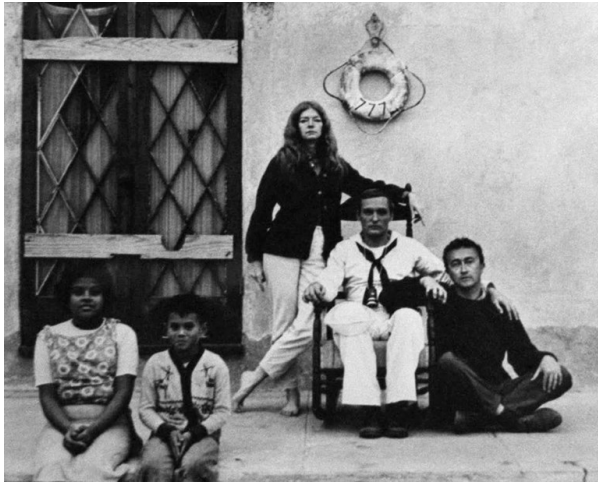
Harrington, as Cesare the Somnambulist, and Marjorie Cameron, as the Scarlet Woman, in Kenneth Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, released in 1954.



On the set of *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*.



Still from *The Wormwood Star* featuring Marjorie Cameron, 1956.



On the set of *Night Tide* with Marjorie Cameron and Dennis Hopper, 1960.



Florence Marly in *Queen of Blood*, 1966.



On the set of *Games* with Simone Signoret and Katharine Ross, 1967.



With Shelley Winters and Debbie Reynolds on the set of *What's the Matter With Helen?* released in 1971.





Directing one of his beloved little people in *What's the Matter with Helen?*



Harrington and Mark Lester on the set of *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?*, 1972.





Curtis Harrington and his mentor and friend James Whale, circa 1950.



With friend and fellow horror enthusiast Forrest J. Ackerman, date unknown.



Harrington as Madeline Usher in his final completed film, *Usher*, released in 2002.



And as Roderick Usher, Madeline's twin, in *Usher*.



Curtis Harrington, circa 1990s.